



PRABUDDHA BHARATA

or AWAKENED INDIA

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Sunset over the Garhwal range, Himalayas.
Quote from Swami Vivekananda (CW 3,353).

उत्तिष्ठत
जाग्रत
प्राप्य
वरान्निबोधत ।

PRABUDDHA BHARATA

Arise! Awake! And stop not till the goal is reached!

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❧ Traditional Wisdom ❧

MAITRĪ: FRIENDSHIP

जनं विभ्रती बहुधा विवाचसं नानाधर्माणं पृथिवी यथौकसम् ।
सहस्रं धारा द्रविणस्य मे दुहां ध्रुवेव धेनुरनपस्फुरन्ती ॥

May the Earth that bears people speaking varied languages, with diverse religious customs according to places of abode, enrich me with wealth in a thousand streams, like a milch cow that never fails. (Atharva Veda, 12.1.45)

अथ मां सर्वभूतेषु भूतात्मानं कृतालयम् ।
अह्येद्धानमानाभ्यां मैत्र्याभिन्नेन चक्षुषा ॥

Therefore, worship Me in all beings—for I am the one Self in all, and have already made a temple for Myself in them—through removal of felt wants, through respect to the ones served, through an attitude of friendliness, and with an eye of non-separateness. (Bhagavata, 3.29.27)

नहि बुद्धिगुणेनैव सुहृदामर्थदर्शनम् ।
कार्यसिद्धिपथः सूक्ष्मः स्नेहेनाप्युपलभ्यते ॥

The value of friends cannot be judged in terms of intellectual capacity alone. Subtle are the means to fulfilment, which is also obtainable by means of love.

Be thou unequalled in loving-kindness (*mettā*) if thou wilt attain to Wisdom. As water fills with its coolness the good and bad alike, and cleanses them of dust and impurity, so also do thou suffuse friend and foe alike with loving kindness. (*Buddha-vamsha*, 2.158–60)

It is our privilege to be allowed to be charitable, for only so can we grow. The poor man suffers that we may be helped; let the giver kneel down and give thanks, let the receiver stand up and permit. See the Lord [at] the back of everything and give to Him. (Swami Vivekananda)

∞ This Month ∞

Culture, in its very essence, involves perpetual creation and evolution, and diversity is an inextricable part of this process. **Recognizing Diversity** is essential to cross-cultural understanding, and that is the thrust of this number.

Prabuddha Bharata—100 Years Ago emphasizes the centrality of ethics in civilization as well as the need for sacralization of the secular.

In identifying with and participating in various religious traditions, in his free interaction with their votaries, and in the expert advice he provided them, Sri Ramakrishna amply demonstrated the spiritual versatility that led Swami Vivekananda to characterize him as **Sri Ramakrishna: 'The Embodiment of all Religions'**. This is elucidated in detail by Swami Nirantaranandaji, Acharya, Probationers' Training Centre, Belur Math.

The complexities of the contemporary global order have failed to erase the East-West, North-South, and other dichotomies that have seriously hampered global harmony. **Universal Religion and the New World Order** is a brief study of how the message of Vedanta, as elucidated by Swami Vivekananda, offers a counter to these global ills, and how the universality in religious attitude that it fosters is essential to religious harmony. The author, Dr Kiran Prasad, is Associate Professor, Department of Communication and Journalism, Sri Padmavathi Mahila University, Tirupati.

Mahatma Gandhi was one of the foremost exponents and followers of the Hindu religion in recent times. His interpretation and practical application of the principles of Hindu life has had a singular influence on

contemporary Hinduism. **Hinduism and Gandhiji** is a review of some of these concepts by Dr Radharani P, Lecturer in Philosophy, Kariavattom.

Dr Jeffery D Long concludes his study of **Teaching Philosophy across Cultures** by exploring how the instructor's world view affects the study of religion, and how religious practices and politically charged topics could be included in religious studies courses without offending student sensibilities. The author is Assistant Professor of Religious Studies, Elizabethtown College, Elizabethtown.

Syncretism and pluralism, receptivity and openness, creativity and self-renewal, self-understanding and intuition are all integral to modernity. Dr Priyavrat Shukla, Reader, Department of Philosophy, Rani Durgawati University, Jabalpur, contextualizes these to the Indian scenario in the concluding instalment of **Modernization in India and Undercurrents of Assimilative Appropriation**.

That the discovery of one's inner essence and the establishment of an egalitarian society are not contradictory activities is highlighted in **Mysticism and Social Transformation** by Dr Beatrice Bruteau, a member of the Vedanta Centre of Atlanta and an adjunct professor at the Divinity School, Wake Forest University, Winston-Salem.

In the final instalment of **In the Vrindavan of My Heart** Swami Achyutanandaji, Ramakrishna Math, Belur, recalls the associations of Sri Ramakrishna and his companions with Vrindavan. The adapted translation from the author's original Bengali text, *Hridi Brindabane*, has been provided by Smt. Chhaya Ghosh, Durgapur.

Recognizing Diversity

EDITORIAL

Culture is something we are born ‘into’ rather than ‘with’. Being the sum total of our acquired capabilities and habits, it is something we ‘cultivate’. Our long infancy and childhood is symbolic of the extent of this acquisition and the complexity of the process involved. And, in the ultimate analysis, culture is about symbols and symbolic processes.

Neither an ape nor a man has any difficulty in discerning a banana as edible. But there is no evidence to suggest that an ape can appreciate the sentiments evoked in a devotee when that banana is turned into prasad by offering it to a deity. This holiness or sanctity is a cultural category which does not inhere in the material properties of the object concerned. It is a specifically human abstraction, as are many of our beliefs, customs, and morals, and as is much of our language and even knowledge.

The religious or spiritual instinct has been regarded as an a priori category of consciousness by many religious thinkers and scholars—as Brahman, revealed in every act of cognition according to the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*, as the pre-rational awareness of ‘the numinous’ posited by Rudolf Otto, or as the ‘categorical imperative’ or moral urge recognized by Kant. In its ultimate essence this spiritual category is ineffable. The Upanishads describe Brahman as beyond all mental categories, a fact reiterated by Sri Ramakrishna through his own experience. But every human being tries to express his or her own experience and understanding of this category through the symbols of language (as religious texts, lore, and mythology), ritual, and religious art. In so doing we give birth to religion as a cultural process.

Religions with specific founders may trace their birth to a specific time and place, but religions like Hinduism do not answer to this crite-

lion. Even Buddhism with a historical ‘founder’ has its pantheon of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, which reduces the historical Buddha to a solitary link in the vast cosmic process of Dharma stretching way beyond historical time. When looked at objectively, even historical religions are found to be undergoing constant transition and transformation, despite their dogmas, for *religion is as much a process as is culture*.

Diversity as Culture

Symbols may have personal as well as collective meaning. Our signatures are uniquely personal symbols, while the language we write in must needs be more universally meaningful for it to be of use. But no language can be fully universal. India alone has over eight hundred languages and dialects, each with its specific population of users. This is indicative of the process of differentiation that languages undergo as they grow and spread. The presence of numerous cognate and borrowed words in each language reflects the intermingling that nourishes both language and culture.

But in the process of development even sister languages can turn mutually unintelligible. The close relationship between Hindi and Urdu is reflected in the similarity of their grammatical structure, but the predominance of Sanskrit terms in the vocabulary of Hindi and of Persian and Arabic terms in Urdu virtually makes their literary forms mutually unintelligible.

A similar process of diversification is seen in the sphere of religion as well. Buddhism, though in many senses a revolt against the Vedic religion, shared many of the forms and practices that obtained in the contemporary Indian culture, and as it spread to China and Tibet it intermingled with Confucian, Tao, and shamanistic Bon cultures to give rise to Chinese

and Tibetan Buddhism. The Jewish, Christian, and Islamic religions are all 'Abrahamic', and yet, more often than not, have asserted their uniqueness through conflict rather than cooperation. Sikhism is an example of a religion that, in its relatively short history, has been involved in close cooperation as well as conflict with its cognate religions, Hinduism and Islam.

Both as a product of human thought and activity and as a human acquisition, culture entails diversity. '*Anantam vai manah anantā vishve devāḥ*; Infinite indeed is the mind, and infinite are the Vishvadevas (gods)', says the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*. The genetic uniqueness of every human individual ensures the uniqueness of our beliefs, attitudes and behaviour. As these very elements are responsible for the development of culture, cultural diversity is both natural and self-perpetuating. In the words of Swami Vivekananda: 'Variety is the very soul of life. When it dies out entirely, creation will die. When this variation in thought is kept up, we must exist; and we need not quarrel because of this variety.' For if every mind has the potential for infinite modifications, therein lies the locus of unity: 'In which [mind] all the gods become one', in the words of the Veda.

Celebrating Diversity

Human brains are structured to seek novelty. It is this that manifests as inquisitiveness and the creativity that makes for the diversity in scientific and cultural advances. This again is the trait that is exploited by the media, the advertising agencies, and the consumer industries in constantly changing the appearance of products to retain their appeal. So pervasive is this thirst for novelty that one would expect the celebration of diversity to be a natural component of human behaviour. Why then do we see so much racial, ethnic, religious and class conflict?

If humans seek diversity, they are also possessive and protective of their real and imagined identities (both personal and social). In fact our identities are often defined in contrast to others' ('we' against 'they'), and conflict tends to

strengthen this identity. Most contemporary wars (be they in the Middle East, the Balkans, Africa, or Sri Lanka) have strong ethnic and religious components.

Contrasting one's identity with others would not in itself have been harmful but for the fact that we always tend to judge our 'in group' more favourably and attribute negative traits, faults, and shortcomings to 'others'. This may be a way of enhancing one's self-esteem, but in the social sphere (where it is termed 'the ultimate attribution error') the consequences can be devastating. All chauvinism, fundamentalism, and prejudice can be traced back to this tendency.

Another related source of prejudice is the tendency to stereotype. We structure our understanding of social groups into fixed categories which we then use to judge all members of the concerned groups. Moreover, we take greater notice of facts which support our beliefs and ignore contradictory details, and this in turn keeps strengthening the stereotype. While positive stereotypes can only lead to disappointment, negative ones form the seeds of hate and discriminatory behaviour.

How do we get over these propensities? Recognition of their presence would be a vital first step. The dogmatic 'my view alone is correct' attitude is one thing that Sri Ramakrishna consistently protested. The ability to consider, let alone appreciate, an alternate viewpoint is a capacity that needs careful nurture if we are to get over, at least partially, the cultural blindness that is so ubiquitous. A deeper—and for some, more radical—approach would lie in the practice of building cross-cultural contacts. When done skilfully, this should give us the ability to see things through the eyes of others without losing our own moorings.

But for this to happen we must first recognize diversity. Recognition is different from seeing. Diversity is manifest everywhere. But recognition grants it validity. And this process must begin at the individual level, for it is individuals that are involved in the construction of the abstract entity that is culture. *

Prabuddha Bharata—100 Years Ago

October 1906

India is evolving a new civilisation. New ideals and new methods have already made their appearance. Already she is projecting herself upon new developments in many different directions. The great danger of such an era is the loss of moral stability which it is apt to involve. For the aim and effort of civilisation is always to maintain the supremacy of the moral faculty. And in periods of violent transition, the tendency is, by breaking of old bonds and associations, to make the moral scum and wreckage of society come to the surface, and take the lead. The word 'civilisation' is thus a Western equivalent for our word 'Dharma' or 'national righteousness', as Sister Nivedita interprets it, and a nation may be regarded as having proved the value of its past, only when character has always been reckoned by it as the first of political and social assets, when the hypocrite has always been rated by it at his true value, and when the will of the people has spontaneously known to pursue good and avoid evil, all the days of its life.

No people can boast that they have shown these characteristics to perfection. This is obviously a race in which success is only of relative measurement. Yet the fact remains that if there could be an absolute standard for the appraisal of national and social systems it would be in terms of morality,—not in those of wealth or industry or even of happiness,—that that perfection must be expressed.

Morality is not to be understood here, as the morality of social habit merely. The keeping of a time-worn law may depend upon our weakness quite as much as on our strength. The cooking-pot is not the best Brâhman, as the Swami Vivekananda pointed out. True morality is a fire of will, of purity, of character of sacrifice. It is here, and not to the expression, that we must look, to make the valuation of a nation's attainment. Yet some things are clear. When countries that have long preached a religion of renunciation,—a religion of the poor and lowly, of self-denial, of common property, of brotherly love,—when such countries are found suddenly to have abandoned themselves to the practice of exploitation—political, commercial, financial, or all three at once,—then we see a discrepancy between theory and practice, on which we can and ought to pass a judgement. ...

... We are about to throw ourselves forward upon a great secularity. As a new development of Hinduism, in future is to stand the Indian Nation. Instead of the *Samaj* and orthodoxy, the civic life. Instead of new worships and triumphant religious austerities, we are buckling on our armour to-day for the battle-field of learning, of co-operation, of self-organisation. ...

Does it matter that instead of ringing the temple-bells at evening, we are to turn now to revive a dying industry? Does it matter that instead of altars we are to build factories and universities? Does it matter that instead of 'slaves of the Brâhmans' we are in future to write ourselves down as 'slaves of the Motherland'? Does it matter that instead of offering worship, we are to turn henceforth with gifts of patient service, of food, of training, of knowledge, to those who are in sore need?

If 'All that exists is One', then all paths alike are paths to that Oneness. Fighting is worship as good as praying. Labour is offering as acceptable as Ganges water. Study is austerity more costly and more precious than a fast. Mutual aid is better than any *pūja*. For concentration is the only means of vision—The One, the only goal.

—Occasional Notes

Sri Ramakrishna: ‘The Embodiment of All Religions’

SWAMI NIRANTARANANDA

It was 6 February 1898. Swami Vivekananda visited the house of Navagopal Ghosh, a staunch devotee of Sri Ramakrishna, in Howrah to install a picture of Ramakrishna in the newly built shrine. Vivekananda’s disciple, Swami Prakashananda, performed special worship. It was on this occasion that Vivekananda composed and initiated the use of the now famous pranama mantra of Ramakrishna:

*Sthāpakāya ca dharmasya
sarva-dharma-svarūpiṇe;
Avatāra-varīṣṭhāya
rāmakṛṣṇāya te namaḥ.*

‘Salutation to Thee, O Ramakrishna, the reinstator of religion, the embodiment of all religions, the greatest of all Incarnations!’

In this mantra Vivekananda applies three epithets to Ramakrishna. Here we shall meditate on the meaning of the second epithet, *sarva-dharma-svarūpin*, that is, ‘embodiment of all religions’. *Sarva-dharma-svarūpa* means the real or essential nature of all religions. By this may be understood, firstly, the fundamental essence of religions in general, namely, humanity’s aspirations for and experiences of the ‘Beyond’—God, Brahman, or Nirvana—that which lies beyond the world of the senses. This interpretation, however, is contracted in that it fails to appreciate the unique characteristics of the different religions. Secondly, *sarva-dharma-svarūpa* may be understood to encompass the essential natures of each and every religion, respecting all the particular

characteristics of each one. Ramakrishna manifested in his matchless life the real nature of religion in both ways.

Sri Ramakrishna: Religion Embodied

Ramakrishna’s intense longing for the vision of God has made him outstanding among all mystic saints of the world. Mahatma Gandhi remarks: ‘The story of Ramakrishna Paramahansa’s life is a story of religion in practice. His life enables us to see God face to face. No one can read the story of his life without being convinced that God alone is real and that all else is an illusion.’¹ Ramakrishna himself narrated his limitless yearning for God’s vision thus:

Because at that time I paid no attention whatsoever to taking care of my body, my hair grew long and became matted with dirt. During meditation my body would become stiff and motionless as a log because of my intense concentration. Thinking it to be an inert object, birds would perch freely on my head and peck at the dust of my matted hair seeking particles of grain. Again, sometimes the pain of my separation from God would make me rub my face desperately on the ground until it was cut and bleeding in some places. I was completely oblivious to how the entire day would slip away in meditation, devotional practices, prayer, and self-surrender. At the advent of evening when the temple garden reverberated with the sound of conch shells and bells, I would be reminded: ‘Another day is gone in vain; still I have not seen



the Mother.' Then such frenzy of despair would seize my soul that I could bear no more. I would throw myself down and shout, 'Mother, still You haven't revealed Yourself to me.' I would cry bitterly, tormented with pain. People would say, 'He is suffering from colic; that is why he is crying so terribly.'²

Sri Ramakrishna and Religious Variety

We are surprised to see all religions, with their special characteristics, manifested in Ramakrishna's life. Here, *all*, *sarva*, may be taken to mean the religions that were then popular in Bengal, where he was engaged in intense sadhana. In the present context, the second meaning of *sarva-dharma-svarūpa* has three aspects: Ramakrishna embodied the spiritual ideals of people of various religions; he practised so many religious paths; and he accepted and guided spiritual aspirants following different religious paths.

Sri Ramakrishna: The 'Tub of Dye'

A good number of people would come to Ramakrishna and converse with him. At the end of their conversations, each one would invariably feel that Ramakrishna belonged to his or her own faith. Ramakrishna expressed this feeling of the visitors thus:

I have practised all the disciplines; I accept all paths. I respect the Śāktas, the Vaiṣṇavas, and the Vedāntists. Therefore people of all sects come here. And every one of them thinks that I belong to his school. I also respect the modern Brahmajñānis.

A man had a tub of dye. Such was its wonderful property that people could dye their clothes any colour they wanted by merely dipping them in it.³

Ramakrishna was like the man with the dye-tub. This is confirmed by some episodes of his life.

There was one Dr Abdul Wajij who studied medicine in Calcutta. He met Ramakrishna at Dakshineswar through Ramchandra Datta, a devotee of the Master. The doctor was highly impressed by the way Ramakrishna answered his unspoken questions. When the Master

Many have considered Ramakrishna to be an embodiment of God, others a saint. This is not the vital point. What inspires ardent reverence in us is his immense love of God, a reflection of God's love itself.

—Solange Lemaitre

came to know that Wajij was a doctor, he said, 'Very well. Why don't you cure me of the pain in my throat?' Dr Wajij then replied, 'Sir, if you give me the power I can try. Otherwise I would not be capable of curing the disease of someone like you.' As he bade goodbye to the Master, Ramakrishna told him, 'Come here three more times.' After this, Dr Wajij could meet Ramakrishna only once more. After that second meeting, many years passed. In 1898 the doctor visited the Ramakrishna Yogodyan Math in Calcutta. As he entered the shrine, the memory of the Master brought tears to his eyes. At the devotees' request he related his reminiscences of the Master. In the course of his talk, he said: 'Our holy Koran mentions some signs of a prophet. We noticed those signs in Ramakrishna. After seeing and listening to him we believed that he was a prophet.'⁴

One day a Christian devotee, Prabhudayal Mishra, came to see Ramakrishna at Shyam-pukur. He introduced himself to Ramakrishna in this way: 'Sir, I am a Christian, and for a long time I have meditated in solitude on Christ. Though I am a Christian and my chosen Deity is Christ, my mode of worship is like the Hindus, and I believe in their yoga scriptures.' During their conversation, the Master stood up and went into samadhi, his hand raised, as seen in the picture of Christ. At this Mishra knelt down before the Master with folded hands and looked intently at him, all the while shedding tears and trembling. After some time, Ramakrishna came back to the state of normalcy and sat on his bed. The devotee then looked at the people around him, who were amazed. His face was beaming with joy. When questioned by others present there, he replied, 'Today I am blessed. ... To-

day I saw the one on whom I have meditated for so many years. I saw Lord Jesus in him' (382).

Williams, a Protestant Christian, came to Dakshineswar and met Ramakrishna in 1881. He had a vision in which he saw Jesus Christ in the Master.

Similarly, devotees of other faiths saw their chosen deities in Ramakrishna. Vaikunthanath Sanyal saw Shiva in him. He said to the Master: 'So indeed do I think of you. I can't help it. You asked me to meditate on Shiva. But though I try every day, I can't do so. Whenever I sit for meditation, your loving and blissful face appears before me in a luminous form. I can't replace it with the form of Shiva, nor do I want to. So I regard you as Shiva Himself.'⁵

To a casual observer, Ramakrishna comes across as a person who lacks the ability to form an organization, which may be why a Brahmo leader remarked that 'the Paramahamsadeva has no faculty for organization'.⁶ But history has proved it otherwise. Swami Saradananda describes in *Sri Ramakrishna and His Divine Play* how the Master founded a unique organization. People of all religions, sects, and denominations; castes, cultures, and colours flocked around him under a single roof at Cossipore. Ramakrishna loved them all without reservation, and naturally they also loved him. Each one thought that 'although the Master was adept in all religious paths, he had greater love and more sympathy for his or her own path. Under this impression, each showed tremendous love and devotion for the Master.'⁷ And very soon, by the influence of the Master's liberal teachings, they were able to transcend their narrow attitudes and sectarianism.

Many people look to Ramakrishna for inspiration to lead their spiritual lives according to their own religious traditions. In Germany, a Benedictine monk hung a large picture of Ramakrishna in his study. One evening, during a retreat at an English Dominican friary, a picture of Ramakrishna was placed on the altar, and an Indian swami performed arati.⁸ Romain Rolland wrote, 'Allowing for differences of

country and of time, Ramakrishna is the younger brother of our Christ.'⁹

Identification with All Religions

Ramakrishna practised the disciplines of three major streams of Hinduism—Tantra, Vaishnavism, and Vedanta. That he also practised Islam and Christianity, though brought up in an orthodox Hindu brahmin family in nineteenth-century Bengal, is all the more amazing. He meticulously practised each discipline to its fulfilment, not overlooking even so-called external marks and rituals. For instance, he wore red cloth, ashes, vermilion, and rudraksha beads in order to attain success in Tantra sadhana. At the time of his Vaishnava sadhana he donned the traditional *bhek* and wore white cloth, white sandal-paste, and garlands of tulsi beads. In order to practise Vedanta sadhana, he performed the *shrāddha* ceremony and *virājā homa*. He offered his sacred thread and tuft of hair into the sacrificial fire, took full monastic vows, and wore ochre robes. In his *vātsalya* and *madhura bhāvas*, Ramakrishna did not hesitate to adorn and dress himself in feminine attire.¹⁰ He would become totally one with the faith he practised. Ramakrishna once said, 'I had to practise each religion for a time—Hinduism, Islām, Christianity. Furthermore, I followed the paths of the Śāktas, Vaishnavas, and Vedāntists. I realized that there is only one God toward whom all are travelling; but the paths are different.'¹¹ People are awed when they try to understand the extent and variety of Ramakrishna's sadhanas.

Hindu devotees would be stunned to know that Ramakrishna wanted to eat beef when he was practising Islam. It was only at Mathurmohan Biswas's solicitous request that he refrained from doing so. The Master said, 'I then devoutly repeated the holy name of Allah, dressed like the Muslims, and said their prayers several times a day. Because the Hindu feeling had disappeared from my mind altogether, I felt disinclined to visit the Hindu deities, much less to bow down to them.'¹²

Again, when Ramakrishna wanted to practise spiritual disciplines according to the Christian faith, his desire was fulfilled by the Divine Mother. One day he visited Jadu Mallick's palatial house in Dakshineswar. He was looking intently at a picture of the Child Jesus and Mother Mary, hanging on the wall of the parlour. As he was thinking of the extraordinary life of Jesus, he saw the picture come to life. Effulgent rays of light, emanating from the bodies of the Mother and Child, entered into his heart and radically changed his mental attitudes. His old Hindu ideas and impressions were replaced by thoughts of Jesus. At the end of three days, Ramakrishna saw an effulgent God-man of very fair complexion, whom he recognized to be Jesus Christ. The divine figure then entered into Ramakrishna and became one with him.

Sister Devamata writes that 'Ramakrishna worshipped before a Christian altar'¹³ and that 'he assisted at worship in a Christian Church'.¹⁴ Though these claims cannot be verified now, they do deserve mention here.

There are some Christians who derive inspiration from this identification of Ramakrishna with Jesus Christ. Says Francis Young-husband, 'In a way, we Christians were able to understand our own religion better by the way in which he [Ramakrishna] had entered into it. ... That deeply moves us, Christians, because we feel that here was a Hindu, and although he was a Hindu of Hindus, yet at that time he did become a Christian of Christians.'¹⁵

Ramakrishna's spiritual practices were superhuman and so were his spiritual experiences resulting from those practices. Through his experiences, the world comes to know many new things. His spiritual realizations validate the experiences of sages and seers recorded in the scriptures of different religious traditions. For instance, Swami Saradananda relates: 'While practising Islam, the Master at first had a vision of a radiant Being who looked grave and had a long beard; then he experienced the cosmic Saguna Brahman; and finally his mind merged into absolute Nirguna Brahman.'¹⁶ Again,

Ramakrishna was a unique walking synthesis. One can therefore see in him above all other things the *pleroma*, the absolute fullness, to which nothing can really be added. But if one looked for a specially outstanding quality in him, perhaps it would be *ananda*, the divine joy. And in this message of joy his spirit is united with Christ. —Hans Torwesten

Ramakrishna had an extraordinary vision at the Manikarnika Ghat in Varanasi. When he narrated his vision before a group of pandits well versed in the scriptures, they said to the Master, 'The *Kashikhanda* mentions that Shiva confers nirvana on those who die at Varanasi, but does not explicitly state how. Your vision clearly elucidates how this is accomplished. Your visions and experiences have surpassed even the scriptural records' (612). Thus Ramakrishna's wonderful spiritual experiences validate the truths contained in the various scriptures. And what is more, he has opened new vistas of the spiritual world to us. Truly, Ramakrishna has become identified with the religions of the world.

Dr Brajendranath Seal very aptly observes: 'Ramakrishna held that selective extracts would kill the vital element in each religion. He would be a Hindu with the Hindu, a Moslem with the Moslem and a Christian with the Christian in order to experience the whole truth and efficacy of each of these religions.'¹⁷

Sri Ramakrishna: The Master-guide to All

Ramakrishna guided many people in their spiritual life: Tantrics, Vaishnavas, Vedantins, Brahmos, Christians, Muslims, and Sikhs all received his guidance. He taught them to cooperate with one another and to respect different religious paths and sects. He said,

With sincerity and earnestness one can realize God through all religions. The Vaishnavas will realize God, and so will the Śāktas, the Vedāntists, and the Brāhmos. The Mussalmāns and Christians will realize Him too. All will certainly realize God if they are earnest and sincere.

Some people indulge in quarrels, saying, 'One cannot attain anything unless one worships our Krishna', or, 'Nothing can be gained without the worship of Kālī, our Divine Mother', or, 'One cannot be saved without accepting the Christian religion.' This is pure dogmatism.¹⁸

He advised the Brahmos to be more sincere in their efforts to realize God and urged them to cultivate a personal relationship with Him. He said to them, 'Dive deep. Learn to love God. Plunge into divine love. You see, I have heard how you pray. Why do you Brāhmos dwell so much on the glories of God? Is there such great need of your saying over and over again, "O God, You have created the sky, the great oceans, the lunar world, the solar world, and the stellar world"?' (625).

One day some Sikh devotees came to Dakshineswar and had a conversation with Ramakrishna. One of them remarked, 'God is full of compassion.' The Master asked him to explain what he meant. The devotee replied, 'Because, Sir, He has begotten us; He has created so many things for us; He has brought us up to be men; and He protects us from danger at every step.' This explanation failed to satisfy the Master. He said to them, 'Why should that surprise you? After begetting us, God looks after us and feeds us. Is there any credit in that? Who will look after the children if the father does not? Do you mean to say that the people of the neighbouring village should look after them?' He further clarified the matter: 'Should we not call God "kind" then? Yes, in the preliminary stage a devotee says all such things. But when he realizes God he feels in his heart of hearts that God is but his own father and mother.' Never before had they heard anyone talk about God like that. It appealed to them tremendously. It touched their hearts instantly.¹⁹

Williams, whom we have already mentioned, met Ramakrishna several times at Dakshineswar. He renounced the world on the Master's advice and lived an austere life some-

where in the Himalayas (132). Some other Christian devotees, like Dr J M Coates, principal of the Calcutta Medical College, Rev. Harihar Sanyal, who looked after a congregation in Bhawanipur, and Michael Madhusudan Dutt, a convert to Christianity, all met Ramakrishna. Each one was impressed by the Master's personality.

Dr Wajij was also blessed with instructions from Ramakrishna. The doctor asked him, 'Is it possible to practice yoga while living as a householder?' The Master replied, 'If one enters the family life after practising spiritual disciplines, there is less chance for one to fall from the spiritual path. But it is extremely difficult to make spiritual progress while entangled in family life. If you live in a room full of soot, your body will be a little soiled, however clever you may be. Similarly, if you practise spiritual disciplines while living a householder life, a little attachment will remain somewhere.'²⁰

Ramakrishna's Free Interactions with All

Ramakrishna had no reservations about meeting and talking to anyone in the world. He felt absolutely free to speak with all kinds of people. Sikh devotees would sometimes visit the Master; and when he returned their visits, they would show him respect by spreading a clean bed sheet on one of their cots for him to sit on, while they sat on the floor. They would also offer him a hubble-bubble. The Master would entertain them with devotional songs, and sometimes would fall into samadhi.²¹ He even went to Chanak (now called Barrackpore) to meet the Sikh sepoys in the cantonment. He told them, 'Do your duty in the world, but remember that the "pestle of death" will sometime smash your hand. Be alert about it' (64).

The ruins of a mosque, popularly called the Mollapara mosque, can still be seen near the Dakshineswar temple garden. Ramakrishna went there wearing his cloth in the Muslim style, and joined other Muslims in offering *namaz*. He worshipped Allah in this way for three days. In his childhood, Ramakrishna

went to his maternal uncle's home at Sarati Mayapur with his mother, Chandramani Devi. On the way, mother and child visited the dargah (sacred tomb) of a pir (Muslim saint). There the child sat quietly in deep ecstasy for quite some time. On another occasion, Ramakrishna went to a village near Kamarpukur to witness the *namaz* on the occasion of Id. Standing under a peepul tree near the prayer ground, he had a vision, and lost external consciousness for two and a half hours (93–5).

Once Mathurmohan Biswas, son-in-law of Rani Rasmani, took Ramakrishna to the Wesleyan Methodist Church at 56A Surendranath Banerjee Road, Calcutta. There they witnessed the mass from outside the church. On 11 March 1882 the devotees heard Ramakrishna say to the Divine Mother in ecstasy, 'Mother, show me some time how the Christians pray to Thee in their churches. But Mother, what will people say if I go in? Suppose they make a fuss! Suppose they don't allow me to enter the Kali temple again! Well then, show me the Christian worship from the door of the church.' Thereafter, Ramakrishna visited the Holy Trinity Church, popularly known as the 'Church of Long Sahib', at 33–8 Raja Ram-mohan Sarani, Calcutta (115, 135).

O God! Reveal Thyself

Identified as he was with all religions, Ramakrishna appeared to different people according to their different ideals. This is a unique phenomenon. Ramakrishna himself would sometimes ask questions like, 'Well, to what path do I belong? Keshab Sen used to say to me: "You belong to our path. You are gradually accepting the ideal of the formless God." Shashadhar says that I belong to his path. Vijay, too, says that I belong to his—Vijay's—path.'²²

If we want to peep into this mystery, we must take the help of Swami Saradananda. In *Sri Ramakrishna and His Divine Play*, he explains how Ramakrishna, after having realized the ultimate Reality without forms and attributes, remained in the state of *bhāvamukha* in

obedience to the Divine Mother's command. This state came upon him after the idea of difference had been completely obliterated. He became a spotless mirror that perfectly reflected anything placed before it. In the words of Swami Saradananda: 'The indecisiveness that originates from the perception of duality was temporarily removed by the current of the Master's spiritual wisdom. They [the devotees] felt blessed as they saw their own spiritual ideals made perfect in the Master, who was the living embodiment of spirituality.'²³ Men were struck with wonder to see the perfect manifestation of manliness in the Master; and similarly women found in him the fullest manifestation of all the noble womanly moods in him. All men and women considered him to be their very own, regarded him as dearer than their dearest, and cast away all hesitation in interacting with him. Ramakrishna could assume any ideal so perfectly that even the intellectually sophisticated Girishchandra Ghosh would be sometimes bewildered. Once Girish asked Ramakrishna, 'Sir, are you a man or a woman?' The Master laughed and said, 'I do not know' (408).

It was not at all difficult for Ramakrishna to appear as the different ideals of devotees sitting before him since he was established in the state of *bhāvamukha*. 'The Cosmic I-ness that exists between the Nirguna [attributeless] and the Saguna [with attributes] aspects of Brahman is called *bhavamukha*, and because of it, innumerable ideas arise in the Cosmic Mind. This Cosmic I is the "I" of God, or the Divine Mother' (447). In that state the Master remained one with the universal 'I' and felt that all ideas rising in the infinite universal Mind belonged to him.

Conclusion

Let us listen to a discussion which took place at Shyampukur on 27 October 1885. The topic was Ramakrishna's true nature. Dr Mahendralal Sarkar and others were present, and Ramakrishna was sitting before them. We know that Dr Sarkar was, in religious faith, a deist.

Doctor (*to Girish*): 'Whatever you may do, please do not worship him as God. You are turning the head of this good man.'

Girish: 'What else can I do? Oh, how else shall I regard a person who has taken me across this ocean of the world, and what is still more, the ocean of doubt?'...

Narendranath (*to the doctor*): 'We think of him [meaning the Master] as a person who is like God.'²⁴

How free were the devotees of the Master! In how many ways did they regard him! Mahendranath Gupta describes the Master as 'the veritable form of Eternal Religion'. Swami Vivekananda calls his life a 'Parliament of Religions'. The 'phenomenon' that is Ramakrishna is unique in the spiritual history of humankind.

Ramakrishna became universal in the truest sense of the term. He embodied all religious faiths, while maintaining the individuality of each religion. This was possible for him because he did not remain in the attributeless Absolute, but dwelt in the state of *bhāvamukha* that is the source of all ideas, ideals, and individualities. In the modern age, he is perhaps the greatest respecter of variety in every field of human life, as he perceived the unity behind all diversity. *

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My Master: This is the message of Sri Ramakrishna to the modern world: 'Do not care for doctrines, do not care for dogmas, or sects, or churches or temples; they count for little compared with the essence of existence in each man, which is spirituality; and the more that this is developed in a man, the more powerful is he for good. Earn that first, acquire that, and criticise no one, for all doctrines and creeds have some good in them. Show by your lives that religion does not mean words, or names, or sects, but that it means spiritual realisation. Only those can understand who have felt. Only those that have attained to spirituality can communicate it to others, can be great teachers of mankind. They alone are the powers of light.' —Swami Vivekananda

Universal Religion and the New World Order

Applying Swami Vivekananda's Message of Vedanta

DR KIRAN PRASAD

Tremendous upheaval and change have been transforming the globe on several fronts. Rapid advances in science and technology have enabled speedy dissemination of information and ideas. Political and economic reforms are being regarded as the much needed antidote to human misery and suffering. But the dominance of Western ideas and capital has contributed to the impoverishment of many countries, and people are looking for ways to get out of this trap.

Swami Vivekananda foresaw the shrinking of the globe—economically, politically, socially, and culturally—with his prophetic eye, and realized that the interweaving of cultures would be fragile without spiritual unity and harmony among different religions. He is undoubtedly the first preceptor to thoroughly define and explicitly teach the unity of all religions. His historic address over a century ago at the World's Parliament of Religions in Chicago left an indelible mark on the Western and Eastern nations striving for international peace, unity, and cooperation. His message paved the way for a new world order that would be founded on freedom and justice. When the world is increasingly moving towards violent and aggressive ways of resolving conflicts, it is most relevant to recapitulate Swami Vivekananda's message of Vedanta that enables human beings to make peaceful adjustments and progress harmoniously.

East and West: Towards Mutual Understanding and Aid

Swami Vivekananda advanced systematic and logical arguments to break down the superficial barriers between Eastern and Western na-

tions and established the underlying unity of ideas, thought, and spirit. His life was a confluence of the oriental and the occidental, the past and the future, tradition and modernity, religion and science. He was the architect of the spiritual bridge, built upon the central truths of Vedanta, that connects the East and the West. After his extensive sojourns in India and Europe, Swamiji was convinced that a greater contact between European and Asian nations would lead to better understanding of world problems, and would initiate cooperative efforts to arrive at solutions having the collective welfare of all human beings at heart.

Swami Vivekananda was against poorer countries looking up to rich and advanced countries for aid. He was equally against the condescending and pitying attitude of rich nations assisting poor nations in the name of charity. He envisioned India and Europe as “two organisms in full youth ... two great experiments neither of which is yet complete.” They ought to be mutually helpful, but at the same time each should respect the free development of the other.¹ The wider diffusion of Vedanta would link nations with a sympathy and mutual regard in which there would be no noisy cries of ‘give me this’ or ‘give me that’. The rich nations would help their poor counterparts of their own accord. Vedanta places great faith in the human potential for cooperation. It inspires people to redesign their national development with mutual understanding and cooperation. The life-giving philosophy of Vedanta is particularly relevant in our times, when we see many poor countries cringing before more powerful ones for assistance that is hardly forthcoming.

The religious ideal is the greatest ideal in

the East; the West is founded on the voice of politics. This voice, in its spirit of welfare, centres round a limited vision confined to Western societies. The West has given the world organizational skills in developing political institutions, social organizations, and military establishments along modern lines. The East relinquished political and military greatness in favour of spiritual fulfilment. In the words of Swami Vivekananda: 'When it comes to preaching religion, they [Western people] cannot come near the Asiatic, whose business it has been all the time.'² Swami Vivekananda observed that humankind acts on two planes—the spiritual and the material. Europe has been the basis of adjustment on the material plane, whereas spiritual regeneration has mainly originated in the East. The adjustments on the two planes come from two opposite directions, thus calling for an intermingling of these ideals. Swami Vivekananda visualized Vedanta as the channel for a balancing reconciliation between the scientific and religious, the material and spiritual aspects of life. At a time when poor countries are being dazzled and swayed by Western things, resulting in false and unrealistic values, the Vedantic imperative for a balanced valuation of life without imitation of others serves as a vital antidote.

Education with Heart

Swami Vivekananda was critical of the Western system of education—a system which is totally intellectualized with no place for expansion of heart. According to him, such education destroys man by strengthening his selfish tendencies. He is categorical that 'when there is conflict between the heart and brain, let the heart be followed, because intellect has only one state, reason, and within that, intellect works, and cannot get beyond. It is the heart which takes one to the highest plane, which intellect can never reach; it goes beyond intellect, and reaches to what is called inspiration' (1.412–3). He is sure that a man of heart could never be ruthless. The East, therefore, had always laid greater emphasis on cultivation of the heart

than the intellect. Our education is fast slipping into the Western mould, which cultivates reason and intellect without cultivating the expansion of heart needed to feel for the underprivileged and the downtrodden. Such an education can spell dangerous consequences in developing countries already plagued by political, economic, social, and cultural divides. The philosophical essence of Vedanta which proclaims the divine nature of every soul must be ingrained into our education system.

Message of Harmony

Swami Vivekananda's message, to the East as well as the West, is one of peace, harmony, and unity. Accordingly, science and religion are to work in harmony to bring out the spiritual potentialities of all people. Nations should share their strengths and resources for the welfare of all rather than making hostile comparisons between the best of one and the worst of the other. As Reverend Reed Stuart of the Unitarian Church, echoing Swami Vivekananda, had said: 'The ivory of one nation would make a fine setting for the gold of another nation. The spirituality of the East ought to be set in the practical reason of the West.'³ The East and the West should come together in a spirit of humility and pool their resources in an effort to solve global problems. Vedanta as a philosophy can guide this process by affirming the solidarity of humankind and the unity of existence.

Universal Religion

Swami Vivekananda said: 'I have a message to the West as Buddha had a message to the East.' It was the message of Vedanta. Three central truths dominate Swami Vivekananda's philosophy of Vedanta. First, the real nature of man is divine; second, the manifestation of this divine nature is the goal of human life; and third, all religions are like the many pearls strung harmoniously on God's necklace.⁴ The goal of Vedanta is to harmonize all aspirations and uncover the golden thread of unity by revealing the similarities between religions of

the world, however great or small they may be. Swamiji's concept of 'universal religion' would 'show the spirituality of the Hindus, the mercifulness of the Buddhists, the activity of the Christians, the brotherhood of the Moham-medans' in practical life.⁵ This universal religion goes beyond tolerance to the acceptance of all faiths based on universal understanding.

According to Swami Vivekananda, many have admitted that all religions of the world are right, but none have shown a practical way of bringing them together so as to enable each of them to maintain their individuality in the conflux. 'That plan alone is practical, which does not destroy the individuality of any man in religion and at the same time shows him a point of union with all others' (2.384). Vedanta was envisioned as the ideal universal religion by Swami Vivekananda. He defines his unique synthesis of a universal religion as one 'which will have no location in place or time; which will be infinite like the God it will preach, ... which in its catholicity will embrace in its infinite arms, and find a place for, every human being ... and whose whole scope, whose whole force, will be created [*sic*] in aiding humanity to realize its own true, divine nature' (1.19). The universality of Vedanta renders it equally philosophical, equally emotional, equally mystical, equally conducive to action, and appealing to people of different temperaments and attitudes.

Breaking Down Privilege

Modern societies are plagued by the bane of privilege conferred by wealth, caste, religion, and education. The information technology era has enabled the easy processing and acquisition of information, but it cannot easily inspire a sense of history, human relations, or moral values. It has spawned a culture of snobbery among the current generation of youth, who are convinced of their privileged status in society. Vedanta admits no privilege for anyone on any ground. The teachings of Vedanta break down the sense of being privileged, letting in the light of reason and progress among human

The Global Village

The phrase 'global village' has become a common way of referring to the ever-smaller world in which we live. But what does it mean in human terms? If our world were a village of a thousand people, who would we be? The World Development Forum tells us that there would be 329 Christians, 174 Muslims, 131 Hindus, 61 Buddhists, 52 Animists, 3 Jews, 34 members of other religions, such as Sikhs, Jains, Zoroastrians, and Baha'is, and 216 would be without any religion. In this village, there would be 564 Asians, 210 Europeans, 86 Africans, 80 South Americans, and 60 North Americans. And in this same village, 60 persons would have half the income, 500 would be hungry, 600 would live in shantytowns, and 700 would be illiterate.

—Diana L Eck, *Encountering God*, 202

beings. Thus the universality of Vedanta lies in the idea that no one is born superior to another; every individual is potentially knowledgeable and needs the right environment and opportunity to manifest his or her divine nature. Realizing this would motivate people to take a firm stand against all repressive measures, including the notion that aggression is necessary to bring about a stable and peaceful society.

The Vedantic World Order

There is an increasing trend for Western countries to view the 'other', particularly people of third world nations, as potential enemies, and to brand their countries as fertile grounds for breeding terrorism. This has led to the use of aggression and violence to resolve conflicts rather than to peaceful negotiation and defusing of crisis situations. Swami Vivekananda's message of Vedanta carries the eternal truth of the spiritual oneness of the whole universe: 'Behind that idea of the unity of the whole show, the real Soul is one. There is but one Soul throughout the uni-

verse, all is but One Existence. ... It is the one great life-giving idea which the world wants from us today' (3.188–9). By emphasizing the divinity of the soul, the unity of existence, the non-duality of the Godhead, and the harmony of all religions, Swami Vivekananda puts forth his plan to place humankind in a new world order based on the liberal, progressive, and unified principles of Vedanta. This new world order based on Vedanta would enable people to resolve conflicts peacefully in a spirit of brotherhood and solidarity. Thus Vedanta has a positive role to play in stemming the violence and hatred that has turned people of various religions against each other.

The present political and economic order founded on Western capitalism and globalization has eroded the self-reliance of several communities and made them dependent on others who claim the privilege of being economically advanced. Swamiji's vision of Vedanta envisages a new, just social order based on the democratic distribution of resources. He is convinced that political and economic reforms alone can do little to change the conditions of people: 'No amount of force, or government, or legislative cruelty will change the conditions of a race, but it is spiritual culture and ethical culture alone that can change wrong racial tendencies for the better' (3.182). Vedanta stands for collective welfare and uplift of all people through constructive action, and not for bulldozing or destroying others—dominating others who think differently—as has become the prevailing order of the day.

Towards World Peace

Swami Vivekananda's message of Vedanta strengthens the sublime purpose of global peace and action for regeneration of the human race, based on a world order of mutual respect and cooperation. Vedanta is intensely practical: it teaches people to shake off their weakness and to have faith in their ability to make the world a better place. Vedanta endows human beings with the courage to stand up to the vicissitudes of life and lead meaningful lives. It stands for self-help, freedom, peace, and solidarity—values that the world needs to re-learn to bring out the best in human beings; it stands for helping the weak, rather than persecuting them or crushing their spirit. Vedanta will make human beings purer, gentler, and more forbearing, thus making the world a happier place than it is today.



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Globalization—*The Human Dilemma*: Over a billion poor people have been largely bypassed by the globalization of cultural processes. ... In the transition from subsistence-oriented agriculture to commercial agriculture, poor women and children are sometimes hit hardest. In the transition from a traditional society, in which the extended family takes care of its members who suffer misfortunes, to a market society, in which the community has not yet taken on responsibility for the victims of the competitive struggle, the fate of these victims can be cruel. ... In the transitions that we are now witnessing from centrally planned to market-oriented economies, and from autocracies to democracies, inflation, mass unemployment, growing poverty, alienation and new crimes have to be confronted.

—*Report of the World Commission on Culture and Development*, UNESCO

Hinduism and Gandhiji

DR RADHARANI P

It would not be wrong to say that a fundamental uniqueness of Hinduism, when compared with other religions of the world, lies in its not having any definite founder or any definite point of origin. Moreover, different beliefs and practices may be found amongst those who call themselves Hindus. A monotheist, a monist, a polytheist, and even an atheist may be a Hindu. Given its diversity, it is impossible to summarize the main principles, beliefs and practices of Hinduism.

Gandhiji was a devout Hindu; he lived and died a true Hindu. He accepted the essential principles of Hinduism, such as belief in the doctrine of karma, the immortality of the soul, and reincarnation or rebirth of the soul, as well as the validity of the *varnashrama dharma* and of practices like image worship and cow worship. As a firm believer in Hinduism, Gandhiji tried to give an answer to the question, Who is a Hindu? He says, 'In a concrete manner he is a Hindu who believes in God, immortality of the soul, transmigration, the law of karma and moksha and who tries to practise truth and ahimsa in daily life, and therefore practises cow protection in it its widest sense and understands, and tries to act according to the law of varnashrama.'¹ He accepted the authority of scriptures like the Vedas, Ramayana, Mahabharata, and Bhagavadgita, and these scriptures exerted great influence on his life and teachings. His understanding of the spirit of the Hindu religion was based on his study of these scriptures.

Hinduism: A Dynamic Religion

The Hindu religion is not a static entity. It is a dynamic religion which continues to grow with time. It has shown a penchant for absorbing anything which comes in the way of its progress, and its scope is very wide. Thus in

Hinduism one can find the truths of all the great religions of the world. Gandhiji very much liked this open attitude of Hinduism; his Hinduism embraces all that is valuable in other religions. He observes, 'My Hinduism is not sectarian. It includes all that I know to be the best in Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, and Zoroastrianism.'² As the needs of society change, Hinduism reinterprets its beliefs and faith to suit these changing needs. But the changes are only in external practices and have not affected the fundamental principles of Hinduism. Gandhiji says, 'Hinduism takes a provincial form in every province, but the inner substance is retained everywhere. Custom is not religion. Customs may change, but religion will remain unaltered.'³

Freedom: The Motto of Hinduism

Hinduism does not impose inviolable restrictions on its followers; it gives them the freedom to follow any particular principle or practice according to their own tastes and temperaments. According to Gandhiji, even an atheist may be called a true Hindu. This is because Hinduism does not insist on theism. Atheists and agnostics may still be Hindu if they accept the Hindu system of culture. The path that is suitable to a particular person sometimes may not suit another, so Hinduism advocates different ways for attaining Self-realization or God-realization or the attainment of freedom. For Self-realization it offers three major paths: bhakti yoga, jnana yoga, and karma yoga. A study of Gandhiji's philosophy reveals that he accepted all the three yogas, but one can see that karma yoga had the predominant place in his life and philosophy. He was of the opinion that by doing one's own karma one can realize God. Hindus generally believe that a seeker after the



ultimate Reality can follow any one of the three paths. Gandhiji very much liked this liberal outlook of Hinduism and believed it to be the most tolerant religion of the world. He observes, 'It was the most toler-

ant religion. It gave shelter to the early Christians who had fled from persecution, also to the Jews known as Beni-Israel as also to the Parsis.'⁴

Hinduism is not a codified religion. No other religion in the world has had so liberal and catholic a history as Hinduism. Swami Vivekananda has expressed this catholic outlook of Hinduism in the following words: 'We believe that every being is divine, is God. Every soul is a sun covered over with clouds of ignorance, the difference between soul and soul is owing to the difference in destiny of these layers of clouds. We believe that this is the conscious or unconscious basis of all religions, and that this is the explanation of the whole history of human progress either in the material, intellectual, or spiritual plane.'⁵ At the Chicago Parliament, Swamiji expressed his pride at being born in such a catholic religion: 'I am proud to belong to a religion which has taught the world both tolerance and universal acceptance. We believe not only in universal toleration, but we accept all religions as true. I am proud to belong to a nation which has sheltered the persecuted and the refugees of all religions and all nations of the earth' (1.3). Like Swamiji, Gandhiji also believed that religious tolerance is necessary for peace in the world and was very happy that Hinduism accepted and practised tolerance. Hinduism has always been very liberal in its approach towards other religions. It accepts unity in diversity. It recognizes that each religion tries to reach the same destination in its own way. Hinduism believes that perfection can be attained not only by Hindus but by anyone of any religion.

Though Gandhiji had deep reverence for

other religions, he always liked to be called a Hindu. What distinguishes Gandhiji from other contemporary Hindus is the fact that he did not always view Hindu principles and practices in the same way as the latter did. He tried to interpret certain Hindu principles in his own way and tried to bring the abstract principles of Hinduism down to the level of the common people.

Varnashrama Dharma:

An Aid to Spiritual Progress

Gandhiji believed in the principles of *varnashrama dharma*. He accepted the *varnashrama* system in its pure Vedic sense. The *varnashrama* system is the grouping of people according to heredity, age, and the functions they perform. The Vedic classification of society into four classes was aimed at the distribution of duties. The *varnashrama dharma* was meant to set up an organized system of society. Gandhiji says, 'By their discovery and application of certain laws of nature, the people of the West have easily increased their material possessions. Similarly, Hindus by their discovery of this irresistible social tendency [varna] have been able to achieve in the spiritual field what no other nation in the world has achieved.'⁶ According to him the four varnas (the scholarly, martial, trading, and working classes) have equal importance, like the different parts of our body. The four varnas are necessary for the proper functioning of society. The Purusha Sukta of the Rig Veda describes how the four classes came from the different parts of the body of the Cosmic Being. Scholars point out that this explanation is given in order to show us the organic unity that underlies the four classes. For the proper functioning of the whole body, each individual part must work in harmony with the other parts. Similarly the four classes (brahmana, kshatriya, vaishya, and shudra) are given equal importance. Each of these groups has its own duties to perform, and each group can earn its livelihood by performing its natural hereditary duties. Gandhiji accepted the original concept of varna

because it is based on the division of labour and the equality of humankind. But as time passed the varna system gave birth to the caste system, and from the caste system sprouted the evil of untouchability. Gandhiji protested against this social evil, but welcomed the principle of *varnashrama* because it is useful for humanity. Nowadays everyone, especially in India, is struggling to get a profession which will bring financial security and an important position in society. All are fighting to achieve the highest position, and for this they are ready to make any sacrifice. This kind of struggle is harmful to society. It leads to hatred and disharmony. If people accept the *varnashrama* system, they naturally follow their hereditary or natural professions. Then the competition that we see around us in our society will be minimized, and human beings will use their talents for the uplift of society. For Gandhiji, the varna system stands as an aid to the spiritual progress of humankind. He says, 'When I follow my father's profession, I need not even go to school to learn it, and my mental energy is set free for spiritual pursuits' (140). He adds that for the proper working of the varna system the four divisions must have the same status. The work of a sweeper is as important as that of a doctor; so in society both of them must have the same status. In such a society people will realize the dignity of labour. In Gandhiji's opinion the varna system presents the best form of communism: it is communism based on truth and love. If the people of each group perform their duties in a spirit of service, it will lead to a happy and healthy society.

Again, Hindus believed that to attain spiritual perfection each individual has to pass through four ashramas or stages of life. These four ashramas—brahmacharya (celibate student), garhasthya (householder), vanaprastha (retired/ascetic), and sannyasa (renunciant)—are clearly described in the Dharmashastras. A brahmacharin's only duty is to study. In India the student or disciple would stay in the house of the guru or teacher and begin his study of the Vedas and other sacred scriptures as well as the

then extant arts and sciences. Here one point worth noticing is that the guru did not make any distinction between rich students and poor; to him all students were like his own children. From this we can say that the Hindus have had an egalitarian outlook. The second stage is the life of a householder, one who earns in order to fulfil family responsibilities and at the same time takes care to lead a moral life according to the laws of ethics. In the third stage, after fulfilling family responsibilities, one would retire to the forest to lead a contemplative life. Finally, in the last stage of their lives people were expected to renounce everything and lead a life of detachment. They would then enjoy perfect bliss. Though it is said that in order to obtain perfection one has to pass through the four stages of life, on certain occasions people with extraordinary capacity and suitable mental inclination could directly take to sannyasa, skipping one or more of the intermediate stages. The life of Shankaracharya is the best example. But according to Gandhiji, the four stages of life are interdependent, and he points out that *varna-dharma* and *ashrama-dharma* are intimately connected.

Unity of All Life

Another important Hindu principle is the concept of unity of all existence. Ward J Fellows writes, 'Oneness is not the one word to describe the essence of Hinduism, but it is as close as we can get to a one-word characterization.'⁷ Hinduism holds that all things in this world are manifestations of the same ultimate Reality. The differences that we see around us are only phenomenal and do not impinge on that Reality. There is unity behind the diversity. Advaita philosophy teaches us the absolute oneness of all beings. Brahman (cosmic consciousness) and Atman (the soul) are identical. Accepting this Advaita doctrine, Gandhiji declares: 'The chief value of Hinduism lies in holding the actual belief that all life (not only human beings, but all sentient beings) is one, i.e. all life is coming from the one universal source—call it Allah,

God or Parameshwara.⁸ This acceptance of the unity of all life is the unique outlook of Hinduism. Having accepted this principle, Gandhiji could love even the meanest of creatures. As all creatures are identical with the same ultimate Reality, a true Hindu has the responsibility to protect all living beings. Gandhiji approved of the Hindu practice of cow worship. By worshipping the cow, Hindus emphasize the need for protecting all living creatures. Again, cow-protection shows that Hindus have a strong faith in ahimsa. Ahimsa is one of the important virtues; one of its earliest explicit references is found in the *Chhandogya Upanishad*. Patanjali's *Yoga Sutra* prescribes ahimsa as the first of the five *yamas* (moral disciplines), which have universal applicability. In Gandhiji's opinion, this message of ahimsa makes Hinduism particularly glorious. It is our duty to treat animals and even small insects with love and sympathy. Because of this noble sentiment many Hindus are vegetarians. By worshipping the cow the Hindus once again express their strong belief in the unity of all life. But Gandhiji also stresses that, in order to protect the cow, Hindus have no right to use force or violence against those who participate in cow slaughter.

Monotheism

The Hindu religion accepts different gods, but it considers the various gods to be manifestations of the same supreme Reality. This idea is present in the Vedas. The Rig Veda declares: '*Ekam sad-viprā bahudhā vadanty-agnim yamam mātariśvānam-āhuh*'; To what is One, sages give many a title: they call it Agni, Yama, Matarishvan.⁹ Gandhiji expresses the same idea in the following words: 'There is in Hinduism a scripture called Vishnu Sahasranama. It simply means "one thousand names of God". These one thousand names do not mean that God is limited to these names but that he has as many names as you like, provided it is one God without a second whose name you are invoking. That also means that he is nameless too.'¹⁰ Though the Hindus superimpose name

and form on God and worship Him through images, they know that ultimately God has no definite form or name. God is not something separate from us. He is in us and outside us. Gandhiji observed that, since devotional Hinduism is fundamentally a monotheistic religion, it is totally wrong to characterize Hindus as polytheistic. As Hinduism propounds that the different gods are manifestations of the one supreme Reality, it allows for the worship of all prophets in the world. The Gita says: 'In whatsoever way people approach Me [the Divine], so do I accept them; humans on all sides follow My path, O Partha.'¹¹

Gandhiji was both a supporter and an opponent of image worship. Image worship helps the worshipper keep his or her mind fixed on a particular focus. Even though Gandhiji accepts this practice, he points out that a true devotee does not need any intermediary medium for the realization of the ultimate Reality. Therefore he does not give much importance to image worship.

Law of Karma

Hindus believe in the law of karma: almost all Indian philosophical systems and religions sects accept its validity. Through the law of karma, Hinduism emphasizes that humans are the makers of their own destiny. In the words of Gandhiji, 'The law of karma is inexorable and impossible of evasion. There is thus hardly any need for God to interfere. He laid down the laws and, as it were, retired.'¹² The belief in karma and rebirth gives hope to those whose present life is full of suffering. Belief in this law helps one to be happy even in the midst of terrible misfortune. Hindus believe that to attain final release one must perform actions without attachment. According to the law of karma, one is responsible for one's future life, so people are encouraged to lead a good and moral life.

Scriptures

Gandhiji studied the different Hindu scriptures, and many of them influenced his life

and teachings. In him one finds manifested the essence and inspiration of many Hindu scriptures, including the Upanishads and the Gita. Of all the Hindu scriptures, the Gita exerted the greatest influence on his life. To Hindus the Gita is an infallible guide to conduct and a dictionary for daily reference.

Love for Hinduism

Though Gandhiji accepted most of the Hindu beliefs, he also agreed that many evils were practised in the name of Hinduism. He condemned all that he found to be false in Hinduism and that which did not appeal to his reason. He realized that evil social practices, such as untouchability, child marriage, and the lack of emphasis on literacy, adversely affected the Hindu religion. With the sincere efforts of Dayananda Saraswati, Ramakrishna Paramahansa, Swami Vivekananda, Gandhiji, and others, these evil practices have to a great extent been reduced in the Indian social arena. But we cannot say that we have succeeded in abolishing them completely.

Even though there are many inadequacies and iniquities in Hinduism, Gandhiji loved it intensely. He expressed this love in the following words:

I can no more describe my feelings for Hinduism than for my own wife. She moves me as no other woman in the world. Not that she has no faults. I dare say she has many more than I see myself. But the feeling of an indissoluble bond is there. Even so I feel for and about Hinduism, with all its faults and limitations. Nothing elates me so much as the music of the Gita or the Ramayana by Tulasidas. When I fancied I was taking my last breath, the Gita was my solace.¹³

Gandhiji was guided by the essential spirit of Hinduism and believed that Hinduism, understood in its essential and real sense, could not have any place for the above-mentioned vices. He advised people to apply reason and not to accept as true what is not in accordance with reason.

The Hindu attitude towards life and the world has been characteristically spiritual. Hinduism has made a distinction between the material and the spiritual and has believed in the supremacy of the latter. So, on the whole, it lays greater emphasis on matters spiritual, though material advancement is not denied an important and legitimate place. This attitude of Hinduism was very much to Gandhiji's liking; he believed that the main factors that have kept Hinduism alive even today were its firm faith in spirituality, its conviction about the unity of all life, and its tolerant and liberal outlook. *

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Teaching Philosophy across Cultures

DR JEFFERY D LONG

(Continued from the previous issue)

Student Expectations

As I have already mentioned, most of the students who take my courses are already open to learning about and being challenged by worldviews other than their own. Many also come with preconceptions and stereotypes—both positive and negative—about the material they are about to study.

In some ways, the positive stereotypes are much more difficult to negotiate than the negative ones. Particularly in my upper division courses, students can be dismayed to find that the Asian traditions are not all about mystical experience, but can involve some of the same analytic ‘logic chopping’ they have found distasteful in Western philosophy—sometimes to a greater degree than in Western philosophy. I have had students flee from Western philosophy courses, or from the sciences, to take Asian philosophy in the hope that it will be ‘easier’, ‘lighter’, or ‘softer’ (all adjectives that I have heard students use when discussing these expectations), only to find Nagarjuna even tougher than Immanuel Kant, and Shankara even more abstruse than Hegel. Even more disappointed are those students attracted to what they mistakenly perceive to be the easygoing moral relativism of Asian thought, only to come face to face with Confucius, or the Dharmashastras.

In other words, many students—especially those of the ‘spiritual seeker’ variety—come looking for reassurance, for a name and a vocabulary for their personal intuitions and beliefs. And many find this, claiming to discover in one of my classes that they have really been Taoists all along (or Buddhists or Hindus, or whatever identity they find best resonates with

their particular worldview). With such students, I find that the cultivation of empathy is not an issue. These students already empathize with the materials they are studying—or rather, with the materials that they *perceive* themselves to be studying. The challenge that such students present for me as an instructor is the challenge of making them aware of how much more there is to each of these traditions than what they have gathered at first glance—that meditation involves more than just sitting and daydreaming, or that nirvana is not simply a sensation of deep relaxation.

The point is not to discourage or disenchant them—to try to disabuse them of the notion that they are Taoists or Buddhists or Hindus—for this would just be another form of proselytization. One could almost call it ‘reverse proselytization’. The point, rather, is to heighten their awareness of the depths that await them if they continue their studies of the tradition or traditions in question. This is the point of my saying to students who wish to convert, as I mentioned earlier, ‘Keep reading. Keep studying.’ I have no reason to object to a student finding that the *Tao-te-Ching* or the Bhagavadgita resonates deeply with her own life experiences. But I would be a poor instructor if I merely let the student stop at that point, not making her aware, for example—particularly if she should choose to start calling herself a Taoist or a Hindu—of the complex ritualism of religious Taoism of which she may not be aware, or of the brutal historical realities of the caste system.

In short, the pedagogical goal with students who have a naively positive view of Asian traditions coming into the classroom is not to

discourage their enthusiasm, but to draw them beyond the stage of naivete to a more nuanced and sophisticated appreciation for the traditions they are studying, to carry them beyond stereotypes—even positive ones.

Sometimes this can create its own kind of resistance, as disillusionment creeps in. But if the student's interest is sincere and strong, such resistance can be overcome. With most, it does not even arise at all; for they are aware that they are venturing into what are, for them, new and uncharted waters.

But what of those students who come from, and continue to adhere to, a strongly conservative Christian background? Or who are suspicious of religion as such? In these cases, the task is, in some ways, the opposite of that with the highly enthusiastic student. Unlike the student eager to adopt an Asian worldview or practice, these students want to ensure that very clear boundaries are established between the material presented and their own worldview and way of life. If the other students want the instructor to be their guru, this group wants as objective and distanced a presentation as possible.

Objectivity and the Instructor's Worldview

How does one satisfy both groups of students while simultaneously achieving one's twin goals of advocacy and accuracy? How does one strike the balance between the clashing expectations of these varied student populations on the one hand and between all of those expectations and one's pedagogical goals on the other? If one alienates either group (or both), one's pedagogical objectives will not be achieved, at least not fully, because of the resistance to the material that such alienation will inevitably create. The achievement of one's pedagogical objectives therefore depends upon the creation of an environment that is both challenging and comfortable to all of these types of students.

A large part of the creation of such an environment is achieved simply through the devel-

opment of a good rapport with one's students: treating them both fairly and with compassion and, most importantly, communicating with them openly and honestly. I don't keep secrets. My methodology is up front and available for scrutiny. I tell my students what my pedagogical objectives are and the value system that is operating within the course: respect for diversity and appreciation of the great variety of worldviews that exist.

I also inform them from the outset that it is not my intention to proselytize, and I explain why this is the case. I inform them that I do not intend to merely give them a dry list of facts to memorize, either, but that I want them to engage with the worldviews with which they are presented. I let them know that I have no desire to change their worldviews or belief systems, but that I *do* want to push them beyond their comfort zones to the extent that I want them to be able to get as close as possible to an experience of what it would be like to inhabit each of the traditions I teach.

One way that instructors in this field often seek to create the kind of comfort zone I am describing is by maintaining objectivity. I have had colleagues inform me that some of their proudest teaching moments were when students commented that they never had any idea, even by the end of the semester, what the instructor actually believed about any of the topics discussed in the course.

While I can see the virtue of this approach, letting one's advocacy role be merely implicit in the fact that one is teaching the material that one is teaching, and letting the material speak for itself in terms of its challenge to the students—and, as I have already mentioned, I do a good bit of this as well—I would find it unnecessarily limiting, were it my sole pedagogical method. It is also theoretically untenable.

The theoretical untenability of objectivity is demonstrated, I think, in the now quite well known postmodern and Marxist critiques that argue for the necessarily situated and embodied character of all knowledge. One cannot help

but have a point of view, and a stance of objectivity, rather than lending clarity to one's presentation, can actually serve to obscure the biases that inform it. Objectivity thereby becomes a masquerade, an act of deception: pseudo-objectivity. Hidden biases are much more insidious than open ones.

What substitutes for objectivity, I believe, on a postmodern understanding, is an open acknowledgement of one's biases, one's situatedness within a particular context that includes one's distinctive life experiences and one's location in a tradition.

I translate this theoretical stance into the classroom by being as open as possible about my point of view (wherever it is relevant), and by distinguishing between my own interpretation and other scholarly interpretations, and between all interpretations and established facts.

I believe that this stance is not only more philosophically coherent than a pretence of objectivity, but that it also has pedagogical value. When discussing contested issues, such as the Aryan migration hypothesis, for example, rather than simply presenting one view, I introduce the students to the scholarly debate and let them decide for themselves. I also inform the students of my own perspective on the issue, and explain to them why I hold the view that I do. But I also hasten to add that my perspective is only one of many, and that knowledgeable scholars disagree on this topic. I find this approach an invaluable introduction to the practice of critical thinking: that issues are multifaceted and there is not always just one answer.

Moreover, I find that my religious identity, as a practitioner of Vedanta and as one who, like many of the students, has done his fair share of spiritual seeking, gives life to some of the material that I present. When introducing students to Hindu pilgrimage, for example, I believe it greatly enriches my presentation when I can tell the story of my own experience of pilgrimage to Vaishno Devi, which involved

an all-night hike up a sacred mountain in the state of Jammu and Kashmir culminating in a darshan of the Goddess, or to Nathdwara, where I was nearly trampled by a surging crowd struggling to get a view of the image of Lord Krishna. When presenting the topic of Hindu life rituals, I see the students come to life when I talk about my own wedding. When discussing Buddhist meditation, I find it useful to describe my own experiences at a Thai Buddhist meditation centre in the suburbs of Chicago. When students ask questions about why anyone would choose to be a Buddhist monk or a Jain or Hindu nun, and what such a life would be like, I can cite conversations with friends of mine who are Buddhist monks or Jain or Hindu nuns, to whom I have asked the very same questions.

I have consistently received feedback from my students that suggests that, beyond their entertainment value, these stories bring to life for them the traditions I am teaching. The information ceases to be abstract, becoming part of the experience of someone they know. They can imagine themselves in my place, having some of the experiences I have had, and so more easily imagine themselves inhabiting the worldviews under discussion. If I pretended to be objective, if I acted like a disembodied voice without any first-hand experiences with the traditions I teach, I believe I would be depriving my students of a valuable learning opportunity. Whatever comfort level might be established through such a method would be bought at the price of student interest; and if anything is fatal to the learning process, especially one designed to evoke positive attitudes toward the material in question, it is boredom.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly of all from a student's perspective, I assure my students that their grades will not be affected by whether or not they agree with my worldview or any of the worldviews presented. The students know the instructor holds the power of the final grade over their heads. If they know this power is wielded without prejudice with regard to

their beliefs, then the requisite comfort level can be maintained.

Meditation in the Classroom?

One of the most difficult questions I have faced as a teacher of Asian philosophies and religions is the question of whether or not—and if so, how—to introduce the practice of meditation into the classroom. As a student, I had one professor lead a meditation session in a class I was taking. It was a short and elementary meditation, an exercise consisting of simply observing the act of breathing, thereby focusing the attention and calming the mind. It was a brief but powerful experience, and one the entire class seemed to enjoy. But most important of all, it gave us a living sense of what the authors of the texts we were reading meant when they used the term *meditation*. It was not just thinking very hard about some particular topic. It was a guided process of stilling the mind and experiencing a heightened level of awareness.

While a graduate student, I heard a number of my colleagues speak disparagingly of professors who introduced meditation into the classroom. The objections were several. One, of course, was that the professor might have no idea what she or he is doing. Advanced forms especially, such as Zen, require extensive training, and introducing students to such practices in the context of an introductory college course on Asian religions would be highly irresponsible. The other objection had to do with proselytization. Meditation is a *religious* practice in most traditions. Requiring students to meditate could be seen as being akin to making them sing a hymn or pray to Jesus. It may be appropriate in an ashrama or meditation centre, but in a secular environment like a classroom, in which the goal is not to proselytize but to raise cultural awareness, it is highly inappropriate.

Having internalized this understanding, I was surprised when I started teaching at Elizabethtown College and found that my predecessor led his students in meditation. I found that, because of the precedent he had set, it had be-

come an expectation among many of the students that meditation was something they would learn if they took a class in Asian or world religions.

Having practised several forms of meditation, and having led small groups in very basic forms in non-academic contexts, I felt comfortable teaching groups of interested students the basics of meditation, but not in the classroom. During my first year at the college my wife and I gave informal meditation and yoga instruction in a small chapel on campus to groups ranging in size from three to over a dozen students. Word of this spread, and I was soon asked to conduct a meditation class for college office staff. Our counselling services also put my name on their website as someone with expertise who could be consulted for instruction in meditation for the purpose of relaxation. It has now become a regular occurrence for me to be invited by a member of the Residence Life staff to give instruction in meditation to groups of students in the dorms prior to finals week, in order to reduce their stress levels.

It was not long before my students began to broach the topic of meditation. Could I teach them to meditate in class? At first I refused, and explained to them the ethics of the situation. I could not require students to participate in what could be considered a religious experience in the classroom. However, the demand eventually grew so great, even among the religiously conservative students, that I gave in and made meditation an optional, voluntary experiential learning component of all of my courses. I teach only a very basic form of meditation—observation of the breath—that does not entail buying into a religious belief system or philosophical worldview. I do not teach mantras or guide visualizations, or any other kind of activity that might be construed as imparting religious instruction. I also insist on the voluntary nature of the activity. I announce the date of the meditation exercise in advance, so students will not feel singled out. Students who feel uncomfortable with the exercise, for what-

ever reason, are not required to attend.

But those who do attend—and they are the vast majority of the students—often say it is the component of the course that they enjoy the most. I continue to incorporate it not for ‘enjoyment value’, however, but for pedagogical value. In the interests of the goal I mentioned earlier of cultivating within the students a sense of what it would be like to inhabit the belief systems they are studying, as well as bringing to life for them what is meant in their textbooks by *meditation*, I find it to be an invaluable contribution to the class dynamic.

I am aware that by including meditation instruction, even voluntary instruction, into my classes at all, I am creeping very, very close to the line between advocacy and proselytizing. Many would probably claim that I am crossing it. The significant factors, however, which I would point out to such prospective critics are, first of all, the fact that the form I teach is very basic, probably even more so than what would be taught in a yoga class at a gym. Secondly, the exercise is voluntary and only one of several optional experiential learning exercises designed to create a sense within the students of the lived traditions that they are studying.

The other options are field trips to places of worship, including a Hindu temple, a Buddhist meditation group, and a mosque, all of which are a short driving distance from Elizabethtown College. Students who opt not to participate in any such activities have the option of writing a short paper on meditation. All students have to write a short report on their experiences.

Finally, student response to the exercises has been overwhelmingly positive, and not only from those who have chosen to participate. I received a thank-you note at the end of the semester from one student, a very strict evangelical Christian, who opted not to participate in the meditation exercise and thanked me for the respect that I had shown to his beliefs, not only on that occasion, but throughout the course. ‘I was nervous about taking this class at first,’ he

wrote, ‘but your approach put me at ease.’

Politically Charged Material

One of the most sensitive areas in which the pedagogical approach that I take is tested is with regard to the handling of politically charged material—material on which students are likely to have already established strong views, views which may conflict both with those of other students and with my own.

In most of my courses, the political tensions are largely implicit. Because the immediate topic of discussion is not itself the focus of controversy, the tensions to which it can give rise remain largely beneath the surface. Students who believe, for example, that faith in Jesus Christ is the only way to salvation, or who have strong views about the afterlife that are incompatible with the concept of rebirth, can compartmentalize when learning about traditions that teach that there have been many divine incarnations, or that take reincarnation for granted. They can say to themselves, ‘This is what *those* traditions teach’, without any direct confrontations with their own views. This is, to some extent, inimical to my goal that students be able to imaginatively inhabit the worldviews they are studying; but I observe that it is a strategy through which students with particularly strong religious commitments manage to negotiate my courses without having a meltdown.

In some courses, however, this is not possible. This has especially been the case in my course on religion and violence and my course on Hindu interpretations of Jesus Christ. In these courses, it is central to the pedagogical goals of the course that students engage with the views under discussion, rather simply learning *about* them.

The most sensitive topic of the religion and violence course, by far, was the issue of the motivations of the terrorists who carried out the attacks of 11 September. One must be extremely careful, when making the point that these were not senseless or irrational acts, that one does not at the same time sound as if one is

justifying them. But the fact that these acts did have a rationale is a necessary condition for *understanding* them—the central goal of a course on religion and violence.

Equally sensitive has been the handling of Hindu views of Christianity in a course that, the one time I have taught it, has consisted mostly of students who were evangelical Christians. These committed Christians were required to engage with views about Christ and Christianity that were directly at odds with their own commitments: that Jesus is one avatara, or divine incarnation, among many, that the construction of Christian orthodoxy as it is now known involved major distortions of the message of Jesus on the part of the early church, and that Christian missionary activity is a form of cultural violence.

In both cases, I was successful in handling this material by using the same method that I use in my other courses: being open about my own views; creating an environment in which students felt safe expressing views different from mine, from one another's, and from the material presented; and maintaining a sharp distinction between a matter of fact and a matter of interpretation.

My measures of success are the following:

- Student comprehension of the material in question (as indicated in their written work and contributions to class discussion).
- The fact that class discussion, even when occasionally heated, has, without exception, remained civil in my courses.
- Anonymous student evaluations and comments, which are consistently positive.
- The feedback of colleagues who have observed my teaching.

Concluding Summary

My experiences in the classroom suggest that the successful teaching of Asian religions to students with worldviews radically different from—and sometimes at odds with—these religions by a teacher who also practices one of them is possible. The secrets of this success are quite simple, but require a consistent discipline in practice: openness about one's own commitments (as opposed to a feigned objectivity that disguises, rather than eliminates, bias), openness to the commitments of the students such that they feel safe expressing their disagreement, and rigorous fidelity to the accurate representation of the material itself. Openness about one's own commitments, rather than frightening away students with different views, ultimately engenders trust; for with such openness comes a certain disarming vulnerability.

This vulnerability, far from undermining the authority of the instructor, actually enhances it. The instructor is now not simply a disembodied mouthpiece, reciting facts and figures about the religions of Asia. The instructor becomes, instead, a model of the best values of these traditions. Not that I am claiming to be even close to a perfect model! But can there be a better way for advocating such values as honesty and humility than modelling these values for one's students? By conveying the inherent appeal of these values, they are shown to be not only Asian values, but universal human values. And when students can connect, not only intellectually, but on a primordial, experiential level, the human values of the Asian cultures with their own, then a significant goal of teaching diversity has been achieved. *

The Confucian ethos pervading many Asian societies stressed the values of authority, hierarchy, the subordination of individual rights and interests, the importance of consensus, the avoidance of confrontation, 'saving face', and, in general, the supremacy of the state over society and of society over the individual. ... These attitudes contrasted with the primacy in American beliefs of liberty, equality, democracy, and individualism, and the American propensity to distrust government, oppose authority, promote checks and balances, encourage competition, [and] sanctify human rights. ... The sources of conflict are fundamental differences in society and culture.

—S P Huntington

Modernization in India and Undercurrents of Assimilative Appropriation

DR PRIYAVRAT SHUKLA

(Continued from the previous issue)

With reference to both the mystical and mundane viewpoints on identity it may be noted that man is not an isolated being but a representative of constitutive and complex relationships. He is believed to be related spiritually, or essentially, to the universal or eternal Self, and culturally with other selves who are temporal, or in other words, parts of his time and tradition. Apart from the mystical or esoteric approach, spiritual identity can also be determined with reference to the entire spiritual-cultural heritage of the person and society. This heritage is an important factor in one's cultural involvement. Since there is a plurality of little traditions—of different geographical, regional, tribal and communal as well as religious origins—in India, we have to take into account identities of various types. Such identities, including the ethnic one,¹⁷ form the temporal aspects of Indian culture. So these may sometimes be lost, or fall victim to identity-crises, in the course of cultural changes of a radical nature. It is significant—provided one believes in the scriptural dictum of mystical identity of the human self with the divine universal Self (which can be described as essential or spiritualistic identity)—that the essential or spiritualistic identity does not exclude the *other*, for the *other* is also constituted of similar intrinsic elements. This is the foundational notion of identity with reference to the nature of human existence per se, explored, *largely believed*, and well defined in the great tradition of Indian culture. We are here ignoring the minor traditions who think otherwise. *Sravaṇa*, *manana*, and *nididdhyāsana*

(study, reflection, and contemplation) of the relevant scriptural aphorisms or some other way of realizing our true Self can give us solace during moments of anxiety and crisis. It is, however, important that such identity does not exclude the other forms of identity determinable in mundane terms. It only denies their foundational and eternal status and is able to integrate them within itself.

Syncretism and Plurality

A certain dialectic or complementary relationship between pluralism and syncretism seems to pervade the colourful fabric of Indian civilization. Three interrelated strands of this dialectic may be delineated¹⁸: (a) pan-Indian, (b) within the fold of Hinduism, and (c) regional. The pan-Indian, civilizational dimension of cultural pluralism and syncretism encompasses racial diversity and admixture, linguistic heterogeneity as well as fusion, and variations as well as synthesis in customs, behaviour patterns, beliefs and rituals. Pluralism has been one of the quintessential features of Hinduism both at the metaphysical as well as socio-cultural levels. At the metaphysical level, truth was sometimes asserted pluralistically. For instance, if two Shruti traditions are in conflict, both of them are held as imperatives, resulting in two or more parallel little traditions. One great tradition integrates different beliefs within itself. That is why the great Indian cultural heritage is called magnanimous in nature and is perhaps the richest in content. Thus two or more distinct religious communities or little traditions are formed owing to varying inter-

pretations of a single scriptural truth or one identical spiritual heritage. The inherently pluralistic ethos of Hinduism is reflected in the divergent range of beliefs, convictions, customs and behaviour patterns. The survival of pre-Aryan deities, rituals, and ceremonies amongst relatively segregated groups of people, in different tribal communities for instance, highlights the process of syncretism.

The epic tradition also bears the seeds of pluralism. For instance, the *rāmakathā* (Ramayana narrative) and Puranic symbolism have several variants or versions, each equally well recognized. The process of acculturation and integration has been extensively at work, especially at the regional level. Though each community asserts a distinctive identity and ethos of its own, which has its own social relevance and functionality, inter-community relations are marked by interaction, exchange and integration. Rather, each community forms a sector of a comprehensive and dynamic network. The sharing of space, regional ethos, and overlapping cultural traits minimize the religious and sectarian differences and bind regional communities together.¹⁹

Creativity and Self-renewal

There is always the instrumentality of thinkers of creative orientation—intuitively awakened and devoid of any esoteric involvements—in envisaging new visions of culture. The creative field of art and literature is being constantly enriched by them. Yash Dev Shalya, for instance, seems eager to explore afresh such avenues of enriching experience through his journey within the *srjanātma* *pratyāṁmukhatā* (creative inwardness) of consciousness. Shalya defines the period marked by the impact of modernity as *ātmanavīkaraṇātma* (self-renewing) and *ātmasrjanātma* (self-creative).²⁰ Immediately after the spread of modernity in the Indian subcontinent there emerged a series of thinkers, either persons coming from a purely spiritual lineage or those of exclusively creative temperament, who showed remarkable

interest in the review of the Indian tradition and also in fresh creative envisioning of the direction and destination of new cultural ideas. In any case, the spirit of assimilation along with well-considered appropriation of alien culture and beliefs was alive and active even in the post-independence Indian thought in social and cultural contexts.²¹ Radhakrishnan, for instance, has pointed out in his *Eastern Religions and Western Thought* that India has performed several times in its history, and quite successfully at that, the tasks and experiments of fusion of divergent races, cults, and philosophical beliefs.

With reference to the *sanātana* or essential aspects of Indian cultural heritage and the tendency for assimilative and integrated development vibrant and active within itself, one cannot justifiably think of the periodic cultures of exclusively ethnic variety as singularly forming the much debated concept of national identity. Whether it is the temporal impact of modernity or the expression of local or ethnic elements, all are but transient phases in the bosom of a great culture of eternal or *sanātana* nature.

Receptivity and Openness

The most significant factor that one can notice in the so-called modernization of Indian culture is the involvement of the finest minds of the nation in the process of transformation of cultural forms already available inside the two traditions—our own as well as alien; in the intuitive as well as deliberate envisioning of new forms; and in the assimilation of what is beneficial and worth accepting within the domain of modernity through appropriation. This could happen only because those minds were open. Such openness has already been acknowledged as the essential feature of modernity. There are many noteworthy thinkers who accept that even during moments of rather intrusive modernity, the foundational and *sanātana* aspect of the great Indian cultural tradition could keep itself intact and assimilate whatever it evaluated as signifi-

cant in alien thought. Milton Singer observes:

The weight of the present evidence seems to me to show that, while modernizing influences are undoubtedly changing many aspects of Indian society and culture, they have not destroyed its *basic structure and pattern*. They have given Indians new alternatives and some new choices of lifestyle but the structure is so flexible and rich that many Indians have accepted many modern innovations without loss of their Indianness. They have, in other words, been able to combine choices which affirm some aspects of their cultural traditions with innovative choices.²²

Unless we accept that there is something *sanātana* or eternal inherent in Indian culture, keeping itself identical and intact throughout the ages and amidst revolutionary changes, we cannot hold the view that it is assimilative. This may be called a national identity or the spirit of the Indian culture or simply the cultural identity of India.

Self-understanding and Intuition

Self-understanding precedes every other form of understanding. It determines the modes and orientations of our perceptions and the presuppositions of our interpretations. The phenomenology of transformation of traditional forms and envisioning of new forms on the basis of either a purely creative intuition or a rational/reactionary response to historical and environmental influences or an illumination mystically made available to a saintly person (*sadhaka*) during moments of supramental meditation is very interesting and somehow thought provoking. Every cultural formation has a vision behind it. Even if such culture is the result of a revolution, that revolution itself is an outcome of an inspiring intuition. The Upanishads are abundantly rich in stories of states of indecision and the dialectics through which a conclusive judgement is arrived at. After a long chain of dialogues it was the *rishi*, the seer of all possible perspectives and the judge of the right one, who would give the most appropriate answer possible in a particular situation. A person with a pure spiritual orientation may

have first-hand knowledge of alternative possibilities and the capability for complex-free judicious choice. Every thought expressive of different ideologies—whether materialistic or spiritualistic or pertaining to some other form of Hegelian dialectic—takes birth, is nurtured and attains maturity in consciousness itself. The Tantras say, '*tadbhūmikāḥ sarvadarśana-sthitayaḥ*',²³ implying thereby that the positions of various systems of philosophy are only specific states of consciousness pertaining to different platforms and perspectives. Vivekananda also acknowledges the variety of stages of perception or realization of reality, and the consequent interpretive aptitudes in spiritual aspirants: '*There are, therefore, many stages*, and we need not quarrel about them even if there have been quarrels among the ancient commentators, whom all of us ought to revere; for there is no limitation to knowledge, there is no omniscience exclusively the property of any one in ancient or modern times.'²⁴ The Agamas hold, and Sri Aurobindo has also propounded the idea, that the consciousness which is arranging itself in the macrocosm, identically structures and determines the formation of the human microcosm: '*Yat pinde tat brahmāṇḍe*.' It implies that creative envisioning is a natural choice in consciousness beginning at the microcosmic level; everything else, including ideologies and institutions, is simply an expression of our creative conscious considerations. We find a similar mode of thinking in Sri Aurobindo. Assigning much significance to and following the line of integral interpretation of Indian texts and tradition, he suggests a *creative formation within the self of whatever one finds worthwhile and inspiring outside*:

The spiritual and the temporal have indeed to be perfectly harmonized, for the spirit works through mind and body. But the purely intellectual or heavily material culture of the kind that Europe now favours bears in its heart the seed of death; for the living aim of culture is the realization on earth of the kingdom of heaven. India, though its urge is towards the Eternal, since that

is always the highest, the entirely real, still contains in her own culture and her own philosophy a supreme reconciliation of the eternal and the temporal and she need not seek it from outside. ... the novel formation must be a *new self-expression or self-creation developed from within*; it must be characteristic of the spirit and not servilely borrowed from the embodiment of an alien nature.²⁵

Rinterpreting the Tradition

In situations of doubt or danger involving an identity crisis due to intrusive alien cultural influences, one can have recourse to the spiritual remedial measures already available in the Shrutis or as exhibited in the lives of the finest minds within the tradition—'*mahājano yena gataḥ sa panthāḥ*'. Nevertheless, the directives pertaining to 'openness' as an important element of modernity are also evident in our ancient Vedic tradition. Surprisingly, during the early days of modernity in India, there were a great number of scholars and saintly persons, of Indian as well as foreign origin, who wrote exhaustively—experientially, comparatively, and sometimes even creatively—about the great Indian traditions of Vedic or Tantric origin for the sake of their regeneration. This endeavour helped people know and assimilate the deepest, universally understandable import of their old traditions and scriptures in the modified new environment and characteristic openness of rationality. Their interpretations were sometimes radically different from what had been offered centuries back by scholars of the tradition. But those differences and suggestions for radical modification can neither put an end to the great Indian cultural tradition nor keep it segregated. Such new interpretations were often rather convincing. Consciousness of the particular age (yuga) is reflected in the consciousness of the individual who attempts to understand a text or a tradition. This is perhaps the reason why people of that particular era readily follow these interpretations. In spite of their mental openness towards scientific inventions and other innovative ideas that emerged in the social, economic,

and political spheres of human activity during this period, these new interpreters could do justice to the text, tradition and their own self-understanding, and thus enriched the cultural heritage of India and made it relevant for people, albeit in modified forms. Most of them attempted a creative synthesis and assimilative appropriation of some of the contemporaneous and useful elements of modernity. Nevertheless, this was neither a break with the past nor a radical substitution but simply an appropriate modification. Some scholar-saints even enriched the so called official language of modernism, adding new terms to it along with creative connotations of intuitive (*prātibha*) origin. This I consider a mark of *sanātana saṁskṛti* (or perennial culture) which remains *modern* through its novel and culturally appropriated interpretations and creative formation of new visions.

Let us listen to a somewhat similar resonance in the views of C P Ramaswami Aiyer, who discusses the presence of an essential continuity within the traditions of divergent interpretations and highlights the element of *sanātanatā*: 'However unhistorical as those traditional methods of exegesis no doubt were, they nevertheless had the advantages of the *internal continuity of thought development* from the original sources to the contemporary school; thus, though the path might have taken many a turn, it was never entirely detached from its outset.'²⁶

Understanding Culture

While reading K Satchidananda Murty's views and analyses regarding culture as expressed by him in his *Ethics, Education, Indian Unity and Culture*, I could find several supporting arguments for the thesis of this article. First of all, he agrees upon continuity and antiquity as being the distinctive features of Indian culture. This aspect is comparable with what we call *sanātanatā*. Professor Ramamurty, in his article entitled 'The Indian Spirit: An Exercise in the Philosophy of Indian Culture',²⁷ has dis-

cussed the issue of importance of spirituality and the concept of Indian culture and life with reference to the views held by Murty on the one hand and that propounded by several great philosophers and saints of modern India such as Swami Vivekananda, S Radhakrishnan, Mahatma Gandhi, Sri Aurobindo, and Rabindranath Tagore on the other. Murty's view is not in full agreement with the views held by the others mentioned above, who identify spirituality as the meaning or essence of Indian life and culture. He attaches much importance, according to Professor Vohra,²⁸ to 'cultural regeneration' as far as the all round development of a country is concerned. This cultural regeneration 'becomes possible only through an assimilation of the national tradition'.²⁹ Cultural regeneration consists in the awakening of national identity, consciousness and pride. The concept of assimilative appropriation can only be justified when one accepts some doors remaining always open within the continuity and identity of our culture. This sanction one may find in Murty's conception of culture in general and that of the Indian culture in particular. No culture, including the great Indian one, is perfect, static, superior, and closed. According to him, 'no society so far has developed a culture which is perfect'.³⁰ Naturally, there is no use of talking about *modernity* or any other change in culture if the so-called great cultures are considered perfect and closed. Murty has assigned much importance to the anthropocentric and environmental factors in modifying and shaping of culture. He regards culture as a result of 'corporate human effort over generations'. He openly discusses the prospects of assimilating the impacts of other cultures. Let me quote Prof. Vohra:

According to Murty, being 'steeped in our own culture' and a 'mooring in one's own culture' is a precondition for grasping fully the import of other cultures and 'achieving boundless communication with other cultures'. For him, an awareness of our own cultural presupposition, on the one hand, and our understanding of a for-

eign culture, on the other, are reciprocal and interdependent. Our understanding of the beliefs and practices of other cultures is closely linked with our critical consciousness of our own beliefs and practices. It is only by means of the latter that we come to grips and can 'handle' meaningfully the former.³¹

Fusion of Horizons

To complete this discussion we must include two recent approaches. First a significant statement from Murty: 'Rooted in our own tradition we should always keep our horizons open.'³² It not only reflects the background of the tendency of assimilative appropriation prevalent during the period of impact of modernity in India, but also appears to be a symbolic representation of the *mood of modernity* on the one hand and our ancient Vedic wisdom of '*ā no bhadraḥ kratavo yantu viśvataḥ*; may noble ideas come to us from every side'³³ on the other. Then we have Prof. Daya Krishna, an open-minded and research-oriented contemporary Indian philosopher, appealing, rather strikingly, for a *de-identification* with the traditions: 'We have to de-identify with both the Indian and the Western traditions and treat them only as take-off points for our own thinking which should be concerned with what we consider important.'³⁴ Actually, Daya Krishna is unable to approve of anything other than open-mindedness and an unbiased, neutral analysis. For that purpose, one should leave the platform so that, if needed, one can even question the so-called foundation. Naturally, it is desirable and philosophically justified that consciousness in the form of an ever-searching intellect never return to its previous launching pad; that it always land at the not-so-far-visited world of new formations and novel orientations.

Let me conclude our discussion related to the contemporary interpretive enterprises rather abruptly, by quoting an optimistic note sounded and asserted after exhaustive deliberation by Radhakrishnan: 'Indian philosophy can contribute to the restoration of a real human culture only by renewing itself, by transforming

itself more radically than it has done. It will include all that is perennially valid in the ancient systems and express them in ways that are relevant to the contemporary situation.³⁵ Since all life, including the intellectual, is perpetual birth, enrichment of traditions with new inquiries and the corresponding appropriateness of new interpretations is both natural and ideal.³⁶ However, the most appropriate response to the hermeneutically inquisitive state of our being at present can only be discovered in the *fusion* of the *distant horizon* of the great Indian tradition, including ancient symbols and scriptures of mystical origin, and the *present horizon* of an altered state of our awakened being, with its readiness to comprehend and assimilate whatever appears reasonable, contemporaneous, and valuable. *

Notes and References

17. The word *ethnicity* in a modern sense was first used by W Lloyd Warner during the Second World War: see Werner Sollors, *Theories of Ethnicity: A Classical Reader* (New York University Press, 1996). It appeared for the first time in the *Oxford English Dictionary* in 1972. Eriksen has pointed out that it has been defined and understood in relation to the situation prevalent at that time: see T H Eriksen, *Ethnicity and Nationalism: Anthropological Perspectives* (London: Pluto Press, 2002), chapter 1. The discussion as regards 'identity' refers largely to *Interface of Cultural Identity and Development*, ed. Baidyanath Saraswati (New Delhi: Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts, 1996).
18. A R Momin, 'Cultural Pluralism, National Identity and Development: The Indian Case' in *Interface of Cultural Identity and Development*.
19. K S Singh, *The People of India: An Introduction* (New Delhi: Oxford, 2002), 96–101.
20. Yash Dev Shalya, *Samaj: Darshanik Parishilan* (New Delhi : Rawat Publications), 174.
21. Datta describes this phenomenon as 'judicious assimilation'. See 'Modern Indian Philosophy: Its Needs and its Social Role' in *Facets of Recent Indian Philosophy*, 2.218.
22. Cited in *Modernization of Indian Tradition*, 14.
23. *Pratyabhijñā Hydayam*, sutra 8.
24. *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, 9 vols. (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1–8, 1989; 9, 1997), 3.282. Italics mine.
25. *The Foundations of Indian Culture*, 8–9.
26. C P Ramaswami Aiyer, 'A Resolution for Renovation of Indian Culture' in *Facets of Recent Indian Philosophy*, 4.66–80. Italics mine.
27. *The Philosophy of K. Satchidananda Murty*, ed. Sibajiban Bhattacharyya and Ashok Vohra (New Delhi: Indian Council of Philosophical Research, 1995), 241–53.
28. Professor Ashok Vohra has contributed a serious chapter entitled 'Murty's Notion of Culture: An Appraisal' to *The Philosophy of K. Satchidananda Murty* and elaborated, rather critically, what Murty really intended.
29. *Ethics, Education, Indian Unity and Culture*, 89.
30. K Satchidananda Murty, *The Indian Spirit* (Waltair: Andhra University Press, 1965), v.
31. *The Philosophy of K. Satchidananda Murty*, 257.
32. *Ethics, Education, Indian Unity and Culture*, 3.
33. Rig Veda, 1.89.1.
34. Daya Krishna, *Indian Philosophical Quarterly*, 11/4 (1984), 565.
35. *Facets of Recent Indian Philosophy*, 149.
36. 'Philosophy arises as a question and lives as a dialogue' (N A Nikam, 'Philosophy, Civilization and Dialogue' in *Facets of Recent Indian Philosophy*, 78).

Like all other social systems, modernity too has been historically and culturally specific; but it is perhaps the only social system in human history that has had the technological capability, the social organization, and the systemic will-to-power to make so comprehensive an attempt to reshape the entire world in its own image. ... modernity has shaped to an extraordinary degree the ideological frameworks we inhabit, the intellectual tools we use, and the values that we hold dear. —Satish Deshpande

Mysticism and Social Transformation

DR BEATRICE BRUTEAU

(Continued from the previous issue)

A Universal Human Experience

What we are talking about is a matter of direct experience, and it is a universal human experience. That is why it appears in all the wisdom traditions, Eastern and Western. The most popular of the Eastern traditions here and now in the US is Zen Buddhism. It is fully available without your having to join another religion, and it sets you to practice at once. Karlfried Graf Durckheim, a psychologist who has written a number of books on Zen, summarizes its principles in the chapter on 'East and West' in his book *Absolute Living*, and I in turn will summarize and rephrase what he says.

The first point is that in our true nature, we are a mode of absolute Being. This corresponds to what we have been saying about the central self being the child of God.

The second point is that we have difficulty realizing this true nature because of the customs of our consciousness. We think of ourselves and of each other in terms of our descriptions—objective classes of observable qualities and relations: gender, ethnicity, and nationality; religious, economic, and social class; education and achievement; personal attractiveness and celebrity.

I add to Durckheim that there are three things to notice here: these qualities and relations are observable from the outside, they enable us to put people into classes, and they encourage us to make comparisons of more and less. These customs inhibit us from recognizing the absolute act of Being at our core, which is only subjective, not describable, not classifiable, and not comparable.

Durckheim's third point is that our cus-

tomary categories lead to alienation and anguish, anguish that arises from our need to find a secure position. We also said that.

The fourth point is that if this is the root cause of our suffering, then being cured, being released, means breaking through this category-comparison type of consciousness by which we have been defining ourselves, and awakening to a new kind of consciousness seated at a deeper, more central level in ourselves. This is what Zen calls *kensho*, seeing into one's true nature, and *satori*, the great experience, or great realization. Durckheim says that it gives human life a wholly new direction. We called it conversion.

And that remark leads to this fifth and last point, which is that genuine satori is a shattering and gladdening experience for the individual and also *the birth of a new conscience*. Mysticism immediately implies social transformation. The core reality or absolute fact of Being shines in and through the descriptions, the appearances; they become transparent to it. The new conscience obliges us, says Durckheim, to transform bodily life to enable this transparency.

The famous Ox-herding Pictures show the spiritual seeker, who has tracked down the truth about reality and tamed it to the point where knowledge 'about' it disappears, and oneself as a 'seeker' or 'finder' also disappears in the Void of no distinctions from which the world as it really is appears—this realized person is represented in the last picture as returning to community life with gifts for everyone else. Large and happy, we enter the city with 'bliss-bestowing hands', caring for the welfare of everyone we meet.

But what can we do to get to that break-

through point? Many practices have us begin by simply sitting still—not doing—and observing our breath. That is, we are experiencing non-descriptive existence, just being, not being this or that. Watching the breath, we are also aware that there is no boundary to our being. The breath is outside, is inside, is outside; is it I when it is inside and not-I when it is outside? All our interactions with the environment are like this. What then is 'I'?

This question alone constituted the practice taught by Ramana Maharshi, a twentieth-century Hindu mystic. Sit and ask yourself repeatedly, 'Who am I?' All your answers will have alternatives. Anything you name, anything you can objectify, will be contingent and relative. But the 'I' knows that, so the true 'I' is still beyond. You have to stop looking out for the Self, and just centre in to *being* the Self. Ramana realized the transcendent Self while still a teenager, abandoned all descriptions, spent years stabilizing this realization, and blossomed as a totally self-giving lover of all people. Everything he did after that was for the benefit of others.

Other Hindu teachers offer a great variety of ways to relax our grip on the descriptive identification of ourselves and others. The basic yoga is karma yoga, union with the Absolute through action, service to others with increasingly pure and selfless intention. Doing one's duty with devotion, without complaint. Most people also want a way of expressing their emotional yearning for union with a personal God. God, who is really without form or image or description, can be imaged by us (temporarily) in many ways. The devotee should choose an image that makes a real appeal, and relate to God as mother, child, friend, teacher, sweetheart, king—the Hindu pantheon overflows with images of the unimaginable. Love and serve the God you really adore and gradually merge in the Reality that that image is mediating to you. This is bhakti yoga.

Some people do not feel attracted to either of these ways. They want to understand the

Truth, they want to unite with the absolute in their deepest mind, by way of intellectual intuition, jnana yoga, using finer concepts, understandings that are more and more intimate, until the subject and object merge into one. Still others directly control their consciousness, still the body, breath, imagination, feelings, mind, until only one point of focus is left, and then that disappears in the absolute union of raja yoga.

The Jewish insight into our situation in Being can be summed up in the central prayer called Shema, which I will paraphrase this way: 'Really hear this, all you who struggle with God: The Absolute of Being, who has no descriptive name, who is our God, is One.' Perhaps we may say, 'is Oneness'. (I will just mention, on the side, that the Hebrew word for One is *echad*, and the Sanskrit word for One is *ekam*—as in 'The Reality is One, people call it by various names.') The Shema, recited several times every day, expresses for me the mystical experience, the realization of radical oneness in Being.

The consequences of that find expression in a multitude of particulars in everyday life, commandments aimed at protection of the powerless in society and movement towards equalizing goods and care. Some people have actually modelled loving one's neighbours with full heart, soul, and substance, giving away what they have as soon as it is needed by someone else. A recent example of that in the Jewish world would be Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach, active in the renewal of Kabbalistic Judaism and well known for his singing and composing of devotional songs. He used to go out regularly to the homeless people living in boxes alongside Riverside Drive in Manhattan, handing out money, giving blessings and hugs and warm words to each 'holy brother, holy sister'.

Human beings are expressions of God and are in this world as partners with God in the creative enterprise. Where the world has strayed from the right way, become ill or broken, we are called to heal and repair it. The world is not a mistake or an illusion or a temptation; it is a divine intention and is not to be ignored or re-

jected. It is to be perfected so that it is truly and fully God's glory. The mystical realization of union with God, on the one hand, and devotion to healing and further creating the world, on the other hand, are exactly the same thing.

The JESUS Programme

In this Jewish context is situated what I am calling the JESUS Programme. That is in all-capitals because it is an acronym. Its mystical side is the realization of the Jewel Essence of our Secure and Unique Self, utterly precious and safe. And its social transformation side is the effort to establish a Just Egalitarian Social Unity System. Both these dimensions are apparent in the central instrument of Jesus' ministry, the suppers, which I want to describe in some detail presently. But first I need to tell about the ministry in general.

Let me repeat briefly what I said earlier about the conclusions that I see Jesus drawing from his baptismal visionary experience: (1) we are *all* God's children; (2) therefore, we are *all equal*; (3) therefore, we must *respect* each other equally; and (4) this means we must *share* with each other, spiritually and materially.

My reconstruction of the Jesus story claims that these conclusions are the foundation of the message and the ministry of Jesus. In the social conditions of his day—not substantially different from those that prevail in our world still—there was great social inequality, oppression and domination at all levels, and consequent social suffering. His immediate context, to which his ministry is responsive, includes the Roman occupation, the cooperation of the Jewish authorities with the Romans, the disparity between the rich and the poor, the distress of the poor and the dispossessed (for many had lost their ancestral lands, and had suffered emotionally as well as economically), and the endemic question of the possibility of armed revolt.

My reconstruction says that the message and ministry of Jesus are offered in this concrete context, not primarily in a supernatural or otherworldly context. His central issue is not quar-

relling with the Pharisees over religious practices but trying to 'comfort the people', as the Prophet Isaiah said. 'Comfort' in both senses of the word: ease the pain and strengthen. He speaks of real and practical things that we are capable of doing, and my view is that Jesus is preaching that if we go into the mystical side sufficiently, we will be able to transform the social order accordingly.

If we enter into our 'secret chamber', our central selfhood, and seeking our Origin, perceive that we are God's beloved children, and therefore lovers of one another by virtue of our highest inmost nature wherein God is present and active, and if we then follow out the conclusions that Jesus points to and models, then we will have, at the very least, a meaningful life, even under conditions that we cannot control, such as the Roman occupation.

We will have a decently good life, and perhaps, if enough of us do this long enough and with enough commitment, it will come to even more. Sometimes you can convert the oppressors, or at least persuade them to withdraw. Gandhi used a similar doctrine and practice and succeeded in liberating India from British occupation. And, of course, the reason I am trying to promote these ideas is because I believe they are still relevant, still the way to go today, and we ought to study how best to put them into practice in our world.

So, how does Jesus put these principles into operation, which he saw as 'implementing the Torah', carrying out the divine Teaching thoroughly? The Greek word in Matthew, 5.17 is *plerosai*, and it means to make full, in the sense of *complete* or *sufficient*, as in filling out a work crew (a ship's 'complement'). It doesn't have to do with something being 'foretold' and then 'coming true'. I think that 'doing it thoroughly' is a fair translation, and I especially like 'implement', which means 'to give practical effect to something by concrete measures'.

A Revolutionary Social Attitude

Jesus' implementation, what I am calling

social transformation, grows naturally out of the recognition of the universal divine filiation, starting with the acceptance of social equality for all people. This was a revolutionary social attitude when Jesus began practising it, and it is to a great extent still revolutionary today. His own practice is presented in the Gospel according to Matthew (22.16) as something that people noticed and commented on: '... you show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality.'

He does not defer to the 'highest' in his social world, he interacts with other teachers and scribes on a level, and he shows acceptance and friendship to (eating with) persons rejected by most people in his social world, such as tax collectors (who were seen as collaborating with the enemy) and lepers, who were cut off and isolated from the rest of the community. Perhaps the most revealing of his insight and social commitment are the women stories. The evangelists make no comment on this behaviour except to say that his disciples were 'amazed at him' (John, 4.27), but they clearly portray Jesus as interacting with women as peers, having serious, even theological, conversations with them, and in more than one case taking direction from them.

It may be worthwhile to have a small digression on this last point because it may indicate a method by which we can establish the authentic teaching. The women stories constitute a worst-case scenario for the issue of social equality. If Jesus is shown as interacting with women as equals, then he can be interpreted as regarding everybody as equal. The women stories are told in a social setting in which there was no sexual equality. People before Jesus did not behave as he did. People around him in his own day did not do so. And even those who claimed to be his friends and followers after his day did not do so. More, it may be the case that no other storytelling anywhere (until our own day in the West, where it is still problematical) represents the male protagonist as behaving this way. Therefore, I judge that these stories, being

highly unlikely to represent anything else, are representing the attitude and behaviour of Jesus himself.

It is not a question of particular historical events, did he actually go there, do this, say that. The stories establish the character of the man. They show 'what he is like'. Anything consistent with that character is authentic to him and anything inconsistent with that character is inauthentic. The *equality principle* is established as the principle of his behaviour; it is true to say that he accepted that principle, believed in it, lived by it. Any story portraying him as behaving that way would be authentic in the sense that it would not mislead you if you were trying to understand his mind.

My thesis says that this social equality is the cornerstone of his own programme for social transformation, itself laid on the bedrock of his mystical realization of the universal divine filiation. If we have not got hold of this equality issue completely and firmly, we have not got what Jesus is about at all.

The Jesus Suppers

Suppers, banquets, and wedding feasts appear a good deal in the Jesus story. That is not unusual in Jewish teaching. What was unusual about Jesus' suppers, says New Testament scholar Bruce Chilton, was his 'special understanding of what the meal meant and of who should participate'. The point is that meals show how the community thinks of itself. One eats with one's peers, one's equals. Jesus' suppers were distinctive, Chilton says, 'in that they were inclusive; he avoided any exclusive practices that would divide the people of God from one another'. Scripture scholar John Dominic Crossan says that Jesus practised 'open commensality', his table (*mensa*) was open to all. It was part of his ministry of bringing good news and good living to oppressed and dispirited people by rupturing the social class boundaries that separated them and held them back from full life. Chilton says that '*boundaries* were precisely among those things which were melting

away in his eschatological imagination'. So 'what the meal meant' was in large part 'who should participate'.

When Jesus tells stories about dinners to which 'anyone' is invited, he is introducing, says Crossan, a lifestyle that 'negates the very social function of table, namely, to establish social ranking'. But Jesus' open commensality, says Crossan, 'profoundly negates distinctions and hierarchies between female and male, poor and rich, Gentile and Jew. It does so, indeed, at a level that would offend the ritual laws of *any* civilized society. That was precisely its challenge.'

This reconstruction suggests that these suppers were practised in Jesus' lifetime and continued after his death. Chilton calls them 'the celebration of the kingdom' and 'the hallmark of the movement'. Crossan says such inclusiveness 'is the heart of the original Jesus movement, a shared egalitarianism of spiritual and material resources'.¹

Sharing Spiritual and Material Resources.

I propose to develop that idea a little, using a structure I will borrow from the Hindu tradition: the five sheaths of Reality.² Everything—and specifically human beings—is made of nested sheaths, the outermost being made of matter. The supper begins with the sharing of food—a potluck supper, to which everyone brings something to share. Not only food, though, but anything material: clothing, shelter items, tools. This is the first level of sharing.

The second level is energy: we work for one another, serve one another, form emotional support groups, share sympathy-energy. A more intimate sheath is that of the mind, memories, personal stories, news of the day, ideas, wisdom experience, opinion skills. We tell each other about ourselves, we learn from each other, we begin to feel like a community with its common memories and a strong sense of unity.

Shared minds nurture creativity, spark ideas and breakthroughs, join to construct new realities. We are sharing more valuable goods

now, goods that have value only when they are shared. We are establishing Jesus' vision of Jeremiah's 'New Covenant': 'It will not be like the covenant I made with their fathers [says God], when I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt. ... But ... I will put my Teaching [Torah] into their inmost being and inscribe it upon their hearts. Then I will be their God, and they shall be my people. ... All of them, from the least of them to the greatest, shall know me.'³ For Jesus this is the active movement 'to complete' (*plerosai*, Matthew, 5.17) the Torah by making the covenant in friendship. We are to go beyond social ranks—no domination, no lords, no servants—just all friends together.

In this closeness, we become able to communicate even our secret dreams, revelations, aspirations. We are in the sheath of deep insights and holy visions, the *vijnanamaya kosha*. Perhaps it was at this level of intimacy that Jesus shared his baptismal experience: 'And one of the things I saw was that we should be doing just what we are doing here now, sharing ourselves, all our lives, with one another. That is the way to live the divine life, to live as children of God. If we do that, then the kingdom is really here.'

And as others also reveal what God has whispered to them in all the unique ways God has of communicating, a shared joy arises. We are in the sheath of bliss, *anandamaya kosha*. We are being as one as God is One. And being human beings, who live and express through all the sheaths simultaneously, we incarnate this joy in song and dance and all the other forms of love and creativity that have been latent within us.

The Medium and the Message

This is how I see the suppers as both the medium and the message of Jesus' ministry. The suggestion is that it is not mere idealization, but a practical programme. We can overcome poverty this way. We can circumvent class distinctions and controls. We can avoid

the accumulation of wealth at one end of the economic spectrum. Instead of fighting oppressors, we can go around them. And as we draw more and more people into the new system, there will be fewer oppressors to go around. Our moral strength will be so great that domination will not be able to operate. The JESUS programme claims that *we the people*, if we follow through on this strategy, can influence the world system by our numbers. We, after all, are the producers and the consumers, we are the voters and even the investors. We are not powerless. Our voice can be made to count.

We can make a world that is just: when we care for others, we are not doing anybody a favour, we are doing exactly what we ought to do. We are obliged in our new conscience, as Durckheim said, and our own long traditions have always said, to take care of others as we do of ourselves. This is done by acknowledging that we must be egalitarian. This has to be traced out and put into practice in all the varied circumstances of our social life.

It is a *social* life because we are interacting and sharing. We are expressing as conscious persons in a community. And the community has *unity*, it is one in a strong way, inclusive, comprehensive, not leaving anyone out, valuing all. And it operates as a *system*. This means that every member plays; there are inputs from all elements. There is no top-down control. The unity emerges from the interaction of the members. We all communicate directly with one another, we feed each other with everything in our lives. 'We have no king but God', as the old Jewish rallying cry announced, and that kingship has gone into all the people, as Swami Vivekananda said of American democracy.⁴ It has pervaded the people and emerged as the Oneness.

The intention of both mysticism and social transformation is to give freedom and abundant life. These will come, says my thesis,

through the people, ourselves, if we will it and work at it. We have to work at it from both sides. We must take time out and sit to seek the deep Self. We must also study how to transform our societies in feasible, step-by-step fashion. All our spiritual traditions offer us good help in this. Some of them are stronger on mysticism, others on social transformation. We need all the help we can get. We are trying to make a very fundamental turn.

The potentiality for this transformation lies in our consciousness, individually and communally. It will happen only as we do it. The kingdom will come, God's will will be done when we do it. It will take research and debate and experimentation. It will take patience and faith and cooperation. It will take resolve and perseverance. And it will take time. But the time it takes is always *now*. *

Notes and References

1. Bruce Chilton, 'Origins of the Eucharist' in *Bible Review*, December 1994, 39. Cf. Bruce Chilton and Jacob Neusner, *Judaism in the New Testament* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 122; and John Dominic Crossan, *The Historical Christ* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991), 262.
2. I am using and modifying the scheme of the five *koshas* of the *Taittiriya Upanishad*. See, for example, *The Principal Upanishads*, trans. and ed. S Radhakrishnan (London: Allen & Unwin, 1953), 542–6.
3. Jeremiah, 31.32–4. *Tanakh: The New JPS Translation according to the Traditional Hebrew Text* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1985), 839, substituting 'know' for 'heed', following *The Jerusalem Bible* (Jerusalem: Koren, 1998), 579.
4. *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, 9 vols. (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1–8, 1989; 9, 1997), 8.125.

I do not at all like the idea of separating work from worship. Work is worship.
All work is His service.
—Swami Turiyananda

In the Vrindavan of My Heart

SWAMI ACHYUTANANDA

(Continued from the previous issue)

Who is it that has captured my heart with
beauty that moves minds more sage?
Were you the one
who played with the cowherds
By the banks of Yamuna in a bygone age?
You, the beloved of Chandramani!

This was Amitananda! I had not expected to meet him here. He greeted me and said, 'I learnt at the Sevashrama that you are going back to Belur Math. But before you leave, I wish to know certain things from you.' I could apprehend what he wanted to know. So I asked, 'Is it something to do with the song you were singing? Sri Ramakrishna, Sri Sarada Devi, and Swami Vivekananda had come to Vrindavan, and you wish to know about them, don't you?' The answer was a prompt yes. I was only too happy to get the opportunity of concluding my stay in Vrindavan by recapitulating this divine play. I recalled a stanza that Swami Abhedananda has written:

The dark hued and brilliantly attired
Vasudeva Krishna,
beloved of the gopis and destroyer of
Kamsa, who loved to sport in the groves
of Vraja,
full of sweet gaiety and wisdom—
him we adore as the immaculate
paramahansa, Ramakrishna.

Sri Ramakrishna had himself told Swami Vijnanananda, 'The one who played *rasalila* in Vrindavan is now in this [his own] body.' And to Swami Vivekananda he said, 'The one who was Rama and the one who was Krishna is presently in this [his own] body as Ramakrishna.' To meet the spiritual needs of the time the same divine personality

emerged as Ramakrishna. So the devotee may love to think of Sri Sarada Devi as none other than Srimati Radharani and Swami Vivekananda and the other apostles as the close associates in Krishna's lilas.

Thus, due to Amitananda's ardent desire to know about them, my rumination of yet another lila began. I suddenly remembered how one day Gauri Ma saw a pair of feet at her puja altar in place of her *shalagrama shila* (an iconic symbol of Vishnu). She was amazed. But next day when she went to Dakshineswar, she was all the more taken aback to find that what she had seen was none other than Sri Ramakrishna's feet. This experience convinced her that Sri Ramakrishna was none other than her *ishta*, Narayana. This Narayana in human form once desired to visit the places of his earlier lila, and that is what I presently recalled.

I said to Amitananda, 'In the last week of February 1868, Sri Ramakrishna came to Vrindavan along with Mathur Babu after visiting Kashi. They put up at Faujdar Kunj, the house



Faujdar Kunj, Vrindavan

of a wealthy zamindar. That house remains very much as it was when Sri Ramakrishna stayed there. As you cross the main gate, you enter an open courtyard. To the right is the temple of Radheshyam, the family deity of the Faujdars. The staircase in front takes you to the room where Sri Ramakrishna stayed—the first room upstairs. It was here that he spent his days in Vrindavan, where the recollection of the lilas in his earlier incarnation kept him in a perpetually exalted mood. It was at this time that he was so overwhelmed by the sight of Bankebihariji that he rushed to embrace him. The very sight of Kaliyadaman Ghat would rouse his spiritual emotions. Hriday used to bathe him like a small child at this ghat. His evenings would be spent walking on the banks of the Yamuna, which was much closer to the ghats at that time. As he saw the *kadamba* tree, the small hutments, and the cowherds driving their herd back home, he would get spiritually charged and cry out, “O Krishna, where are you!” He would go to Nidhuvan almost every day. It was here that he met Gangamai, a sadhika who worshipped Krishna as a *sakhi*, friend. When Gangamai saw Sri Ramakrishna’s spiritual fervour, she took him for an incarnation of Srimati and called him *dulali*, dear one. She used to stay in a hut at Nidhuvan, and Sri Ramakrishna would often go to her. Both had a similar spiritual inclina-

tion and attitude. Hence Sri Ramakrishna liked this sadhika very much. Gangamai used to cook for him various kinds of delicacies. He was so impressed by the holiness of the place that he had almost decided not return to Dakshineswar. He had a weak stomach, but Gangamai assured him that she would cook boiled rice and light curry for him. Finding things getting out of hand, Hriday reminded him that his own mother Chandramani Devi would miss him if he stayed back. This was reminder enough for Sri Ramakrishna to return to Dakshineswar. Otherwise, who knows what might have happened, for the lure of his past lila had almost taken possession of him, and he had all but decided against leaving Vrindavan.

‘While staying in Vrindavan Sri Ramakrishna put on the insignia (*bhek*) of the Vaishnavas for three days. This ritual is integral to Vaishnava sadhana. He would ride in a palanquin to Radhakund and Shyamkund. He rushed up the Govardhan hill in a surge of emotion and was immersed in deep samadhi. The rich association of past lilas would bring tears to his eyes and he would cry out, “Everything hallowed with your association is here, but where are you, O dear one? Why can’t I see you?” He visited the many temples of Vrindavan. At Dhruva Ghat in Mathura, he could clearly see in his mind’s eye Vasudeva carrying the baby

Krishna across the Yamuna. It transported him into samadhi. While returning from Vrindavan he brought a handful of the holy soil with him. Some of it he scattered round the Panchavati at Dakshineswar and the rest he buried under the floor of the *sadhan kutir* there. Having done this, he announced, “From today, this place has become as holy as Vrindavan.”

‘Now let us recall the Vrindavan lila of Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi. Once she had herself told a devotee, “You may also call me Radha, but then don’t call me ‘Mother’ when you do so.”’

Before leaving Vrindavan, I had a



The room where Sri Ramakrishna stayed



Kala Babu Kunj

desire to see the places which were associated with Mother's stay. I asked Amitananda to accompany me. We started walking towards the north along the banks of the Yamuna. On our way we saw the Chamunda temple. The temple is situated among thick trees that make the place look like a forest. The people here say that this is the original *pitha sthana* of Katyayani. We paid our respects and walked on. After reaching Vamshi Vat we left the riverbank, ascended the small lane going to the west, and reached an old house—Kala Babu Kunj.

In 1886, after Sri Ramakrishna entered mahasamadhi, Balaram Basu had arranged for Mother's stay here along with her close attendants. A room on the ground floor houses the idol of Shyamrai. Holy Mother stayed in the room on the left on the first floor. In the room to the extreme right of the open terrace lived all the women devotees of Mother, while Swamis Yogananda, Adbhutananda, and Abhedananda lived on the ground floor along with a few other men devotees.

Mother would often go into *bhava-samadhi* (deep spiritual absorption) in this room. She had the vision of Sri Ramakrishna on several occasions in this very place. It was here that he appeared to Mother and said, 'Why do you weep so much? Here I am. Where indeed could I have gone? It's just like moving from this room to that.' It was here that he inspired Holy Mother with the spirit of the spiritual teacher, by getting her to give

spiritual initiation to Swami Yogananda. This was, incidentally, the first initiation that Holy Mother imparted.

At the beginning of her stay at Vrindavan, Holy Mother was so deep in sorrow at her separation from Sri Ramakrishna that she would often be in tears. At times she would wander alone on the banks of the Yamuna, much like Radharani looking for Krishna. She may well have been reminded of her earlier lila in these places. But Mother had an immense capacity to conceal her spiritual emotions, and few could know what was passing through her mind at that time.

It was in the temple of Bihariji that Mother said that famous prayer: 'Your form is bent but Your mind is straight—kindly straighten the windings of my heart.' In the Radharaman temple she prayed on three consecutive days to Krishna to rid her of all fault finding. Again, it was here that she entered into a mood where she spoke and answered questions in the very manner of Sri Ramakrishna. It is said that even the way she took her food at that time resembled the way Sri Ramakrishna ate. Just as Krishna had permeated the frame of Radha, so also Sri Ramakrishna became one with Sri Sarada Devi while she stayed there. It seemed as though the divine couple were re-enacting their Vrindavan lila of Dwapara Yuga.

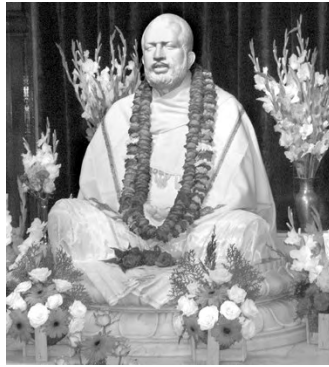


Sri Ramakrishna temple, Vrindavan

I went to Mother's room with Amitananda to offer my pranams. The bed that Mother used is still there. Her photograph is presently placed on the bed. As we were returning, it occurred to me that much like Sudama and such other friends of Krishna, the divine companions in this recent lila too had visited Vrindavan. Swami Vivekananda came here as a wandering monk. He realized the grace of Srimati Radha through two important incidents. He even composed a song depicting the mood of the gopis.

Swami Brahmananda, the cowherd of Vraja, Swami Premananda who embodied the spirit of Srimati Radha, Swamis Subodhananda, Turiyananda, and Akhandananda—all these disciples of Sri Ramakrishna spent substantial periods of time in Vrindavan. The spirituality which they had imbibed by the grace of Sri Ramakrishna developed and flourished here through their austere spiritual practices. Their example of sadhana was repeated in later years by numerous other monks of the Ramakrishna Order, like Swami Virajananda.

I found immense joy in recapitulating the Vrindavan lila of Sri Ramakrishna and his disciples to Amitananda. Today is my last day in Vrindavan. I shall leave for Belur Math tomorrow. Amitananda will leave for Barsana. I don't know when we will meet again. But we had a joyous time drinking the nectar of Vrindavan. I took leave of Amitananda and returned to the Ramakrishna Sevashrama. As I went to the temple, I saw that the photograph of Bihariji had been formally decorated



Sri Ramakrishna's image, Vrindavan

and placed alongside Sri Ramakrishna's, which had likewise been decked in yellow clothes. It was the full-moon night and there was going to be *shyama-nama-sankirtana* (singing of the divine names of Krishna) in the temple. Seeing Sri Ramakrishna and Bihariji side by side, both decked in yellow, was a heavenly experience. I felt them to be two forms of the same One.

It is futile to attempt to express the ineffable in words; to look for the all-permeating Self within the limited confines of temples; to try and portray Him, who is beyond words and imaginations, in so many forms. I have only tried to share a few of the precious moments that I spent in seeing and hearing the glory of Vrindavan. I am returning, and yet there is something that stirs me up deep in the heart:

I will not forsake you, O dear one,
 You shall remain in the midst of my heart.
 My days and nights have all become one—
 As your light shines through the entire world.
 Deserted appears the world
 and the forest seems my home—
 Strangers seem so close and aliens my own.
 Let me retreat to the Vrindavan of my heart—
 Seeking refuge at your lotus feet. *



In the fields of Vrindavan



Reviews



For review in PRABUDDHA BHARATA
publishers need to send **two** copies of their latest publications.

Sri Ramakrishna, The Face of Silence. *Swami Nikhilananda and Dhan Gopal Mukerjee, ed. Swami Adiswarananda.* Skylight Paths Publishing, Sunset Farm Offices, Route 4, PO Box 237, Woodstock, Vermont 15091, USA. Website: www.skylightpaths.com. 2004. xiv + 329 pp. \$29.99.

Sri Ramakrishna is regarded as one of the greatest spiritual personalities of our time, who was unique in his exploration of the vast and unknown regions of the human soul in all its dimensions. He saw what no eye could see, heard what no ear could hear, and discovered what no mind could comprehend. In his search for Truth, he walked alone; and it is through silence and meditation that we can understand his eternal message: 'As many faiths, so many paths.'

In the present volume, two classic biographies—Dhan Gopal Mukerji's *The Face of Silence* (1926) and Swami Nikhilananda's *Sri Ramakrishna* (1942) are brought together to provide a fuller understanding of the life and spiritual significance of Sri Ramakrishna. *Sri Ramakrishna, the Face of Silence* gives us a splendid opportunity to deepen our spiritual quest for God-realisation.

Dhan Gopal Mukerji (1890–1936) emigrated from India at a young age, and achieved a great deal of success as a prolific writer and teacher in America. Rising to the pinnacle of glory, he faced a crisis of identity—a spiritual crisis that proved to be the turning point in his life. He was inspired by Josephine MacLeod, the dedicated devotee of Swami Vivekananda, to come to India, where he visited Dakshineswar, the spiritual playground of Sri Ramakrishna, and also the Ramakrishna monastery at Belur. At Belur Math he had the rare privilege to meet some of the direct disciples of Sri Ramakrishna, particularly Swamis Shivananda, Akhandananda, and Turiyananda.

Through Mahendranath Gupta's *Kathamrita* Sri Ramakrishna came to be known in India. *The Face of Silence* was one of the first books written in

English (1926) to make Sri Ramakrishna known outside India. The book is primarily based on interviews with persons familiar with the Great Master. The fragrance of the descriptions given in the book are like dewdrops on the petals of a rose. That the ultimate Truth can never be realized through historical facts and conversations is the keynote of *The Face of Silence*. The book contains sixteen chapters, covering events from Ramakrishna's early life to his mahasamadhi. The concluding lines of this legendary book read: 'Can anything in any language render the militant peace of the soul that men and women have won for themselves and for the world they live in? And is there one single metaphor or symbol anywhere or in any age that adequately conveys the meaning of Tat (That)? Holiness alone can explain holiness. And only insofar as we ourselves become children of Immortality shall we be able to understand those children of God who have sought to help humankind' (169).

Swami Nikhilananda (1895–1973) was a direct disciple of Sri Sarada Devi, a distinguished monk of the Ramakrishna Order of India, and a major figure in introducing the teachings of Vedanta and yoga to America. Among his many notable books is his wonderful translation of the *Kathamrita*, the *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*. He is like a scientist recording facts that can be checked by the methods of logic. Like a true journalist, Swami Nikhilananda can weave facts into a charming fabric.

After going through these two versions of the legendary life of Sri Ramakrishna, we cannot but feel that the two books are complementary and must be studied together in earnestness. Both writers have tried to convert the radiance of Sri Ramakrishna into a musical symphony that far transcends the limitations of the spatio-temporal world.

Marrying legend with fact, memory with history, this unique volume, which includes an introduction to Sri Ramakrishna's God-consciousness by Swami Adiswarananda, succeeds in intimately examining the teachings of Sri Ramakrishna and conveying the true story of this great mystic, whose leap-

ing flame of spiritual realization continues to influence the modern spiritual search.

The book is well brought out, with excellent printing and layout. It contains a number of illustrations, preface, appendices, glossary, bibliography, and index. While reading the volume the devotees and admirers of Sri Ramakrishna will get once more the chance to sit at his feet and drink deeply of the nectar stream!

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Dancing with the Void. *Sunyata; ed. Betty Camhi and Gurubaksh Rai.* New Age Books, A-44 Naraina Phase I, New Delhi 110 028. E-mail: *nab@vsnl.in*. 2004. xlv + 280 pp. Rs 295.

‘Accumulate power in silence and become a dynamo of spirituality’, advised Swami Vivekananda. Emmanuel Sorensen came to India from Denmark at the invitation of Rabindranath Tagore in 1930 to ‘teach Silence’ at Shantiniketan. After several years in India, he went to the US. There, Betty Camhi attended his *satsangs*, typed out his ‘scribblings’, and published a book on his birth centenary in 1990. Camhi came to India, and a fortuitous meeting with Gurubaksh Rai, who was in possession of papers written by the mystic, resulted in the publication of *Dancing with the Void*.

The book presents the wisdom of Emmanuel, whose only possession was contentment. He chose to stay away from glamour and preferred to dwell in holy thoughts. He was an anchorite—joyous in disposition, and unconventional in outlook.

India and many Indian thinkers greatly influenced Emmanuel. In Denmark, ‘others regarded me as an oddity, in England, I felt freer. In India, I felt at home.’ He explains that due to their spiritual culture, Indians recognize spiritual greatness and saintliness; in the West, material prosperity is easily recognized. Initiated into Dhyana Buddhism, he was known as Mani Dharma until 1936 when he met Ramana Maharshi. The Maharshi considered him a ‘rare born mystic’. Apparently, he heard a voice in the presence of the Maharshi that gave him the name ‘Sunyata’ (void).

The book is partly a ‘who’s who’ of mystics and other thinkers, Eastern and Western, some of whom were Sunyata’s contemporaries whom he had

known personally. Apart from providing an insight into their lives and work, and his impressions about them, he also shares his own experiences and views on life and spirituality. The celebrities include Rabindranath Tagore, Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, Peer Wartin (Ramana Giri), Rudolph Ray, and Grecian Lila (the woman with a wonderful healing touch). He also examines the philosophies of Buddha, Kabir, and Carl Jung, among others.

The thirty-six topics listed in the book reveal Sunyata’s views on life and spirituality, which are spelt out in many places. The following are some gems from his thought: ‘The art of living is living by intuition.’ ‘Instinct is for the protection of the animal in man, whereas intuition ... is for the protection of the psyche, the soul of man.’ ‘Your greatest possession in the whole world is Nothing-ness.’ ‘It is not what your heart is in, but what is in your heart that matters.’ ‘Get rid of happiness, and you will get rid of misery.’ ‘Nothing can happen to us that does not intrinsically belong to us.’ ‘A guru is a bridge—not a prop. The guru must come from within. ... He may be met outside, but he is recognized by the indwelling Self.’ ‘A Christian missionary asked a Zen Master, “Is not the end point of man’s journey the union with God?” The Master replied, “No, the end point of man’s journey is not union, because there was never any separation.”’ The editors have also retained the author’s uniquely expressive colloquialisms: ‘aware’, ‘headucation’, ‘innerstanding’, and the like. To him formal ‘education’ was ‘headucation’ as it caused ‘mental conditioning’, while the word ‘understanding’ lacked depth; hence ‘innerstanding’.

In a few places, where the concepts conveyed appear to be elliptical, suitable clarifications would have helped the reader. The following sentence is a case in point: ‘The “Zero experience” comes to those to whom it comes, regardless of what they do. It also comes to those few who strive very hard over a long period, as was the case with Ramakrishna’ (135). Similarly, one could get confused by the expression, ‘Samsara is Nirvana’, (despite the context in which it is mentioned), if one were to go by the glossary definitions.

Betty Camhi and Gurubaksh Rai have managed a difficult task in editing a large collection of subtle philosophical thoughts written by a venerable mystic over several years. They deserve our thanks.

P S Sundaram
Mumbai

Man the Known and Man the Unknown.

Swami Ranganathananda. Ramakrishna Math, Mylapore, Chennai 600 004. E-mail: srkmath@vsnl.com. 2006. 36 pp. Rs 12.

Swami Ranganathananda was undoubtedly one of the outstanding exponents of Vedanta in recent times. His speeches and lectures, which presented the ancient wisdom of India to modern men and women of scientific temperament and technological culture, were marked by a rare clarity of exposition and command of the field. The present booklet, a transcription of one of his lectures given many years ago in the United States, reflects not only a scholarly knowledge of the teachings and philosophy of Vedanta, but also a penetrative insight into human nature.

It is natural for human beings to regard themselves merely as physical bodies and look at the surrounding world from that standpoint. But it is in this wrong view that the problems of life originate—and it is in the right view, that we are essentially spiritual beings, that all solutions lie. Our sensuous outlook has to be transformed into the spiritual. This change of outlook on life is the key to the solution of life's problems, for our plan of living depends on our idea of ourselves. Our search for the meaning of life ends with the finding of our true nature and the process of its fulfilment.

In *Man the Known and Man the Unknown* Swami Ranganathananda supports and contrasts the Vedantic view of the real nature of human beings with the views of modern biology, psychology, and philosophy. It is one of the swami's more significant lectures, meant not only for the general student of Vedanta, but also for those in governance whose responsibility it is to try to solve global problems.

PB

The Essence of Tripurārahasya. *Comp. and trans. Samvid.* Samata Books, 10 Congress Building, 573 Mount Road, Chennai 600 006. E-mail: samatabooks@yahoo.co.in. 2005. viii + 98 pp. Rs 90.

The Essence of Tripurārahasya (The Mystery of Supreme Consciousness) is a condensed version of the Jnanakhandha portion of the *Tripurarahasya*, composed by the sage Haritayana in 2163 verses. The current book comprises 302 verses, with origi-

nal Sanskrit text, translation, and extensive notes, as well as a brief introduction. The author has based his translation and notes on the excellent commentary *Tatparyadipika* of Srinivasa Pandita, a great scholar and initiate of the Srividya school. The author has attempted 'to present in a condensed and simple form the philosophical foundations of spiritual practice as laid down in the Srividya school'.

Being the 24th chapter of the *Paramananda Tantra*, the *Tripurarahasya* forms part of the Samhita literature of the Shakta philosophy. This work expounds the Advaita philosophy of Shakta Tantras and Kashmir Shaivism with a lucid exposition of transcendental Consciousness which is the ultimate Reality. According to this text, Goddess Tripura is pure Consciousness, which is the creative force, the sole basis and background that mirrors the entire diverse manifold reality in the world.

This translation will undoubtedly serve as a popular guide to all readers of Vedanta, Yoga, and Srividya in general, and to all spiritual aspirants in particular in their quest for Self-realization.

Samvid, the translator, has successfully rendered the selected verses of this important work into readable English. To quote a specimen English rendering of a verse which presents the quintessence of the *Tripurarahasya*: 'There is no bondage nor liberation; no means of liberation nor one who practices it. The undivided non-dual Conscious-Power Tripurā alone is shining. She alone is Ignorance and Knowledge, bondage and liberation and the means' (98).

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Book Received

Vimala Amirtham. *Sadhaka.* 3/2 Ramakrishna Terrace, Colombo 6, Sri Lanka. 131pp.

Vimala Thakar's has been a life of great spiritual ardour and remarkable social commitment. Free from the trappings of organized religion, Vimalaji is not only able to identify with diverse religious viewpoints but has also been personally guiding numerous spiritual seekers across the globe. This collection of letters to a Sri Lankan seeker reveals her unique method of instruction—perennial truths presented in a direct and personal manner to suit individual needs. Illuminating in several ways.

Reports



Left, dignitaries applaud at the unveiling of the Swami Vivekananda statue in Parliament, right.



Courtesy: Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India

Swami Vivekananda Statue in Parliament

A bronze statue of Swami Vivekananda, standing over two metres tall, now graces the Parliament House, New Delhi. The statue, along with one of Sri Aurobindo, was unveiled on 23 August by Vice President Sri Bhairon Singh Shekhawat and Lok Sabha Speaker Sri Somnath Chatterjee. The statues have been donated by Dr L M Singhvi, a former parliamentarian. The sculptor, Sri C D Dakshinamoorthy, received a shawl from Prime Minister Dr Manmohan Singh on the occasion.

News from Belur Math

The new website of the Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission and of Ramakrishna Math, Belur Math, was inaugurated by Srimat Swami Gahananandaji Maharaj, President, Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission, on 22 August. The web-addresses for the site are www.rkmbhq.org and www.belurmath.org.

New Mission Centre

The Ramakrishna Mission has opened a new branch centre in Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh, the picturesque city of lakes known for its culture and historical associations. The land and buildings were received from Sri Ramakrishna Ashrama, Bhopal. The official handing-over on 6 and 7 August was attended by Swami Smarana-

nandaji Maharaj, General Secretary, Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission, and many monks, devotees and admirers. The address of the centre is **Ramakrishna Mission Ashrama**, Swami Atmananda Marg, MP Nagar, **Bhopal 462001** (Phone: 0755 654 1036; E-mail: rkmbpl@hotmail.com). Swami Bhavarupanandaji has been appointed head of the centre.

Branch Centre News

Foundation was laid for a students' hostel at the upcoming complex of the **Ramakrishna Mission, Kadapa**, by Swami Amritanandaji, Secretary, Ramakrishna Mission Ashrama, Visakhapatnam, on 12 July. The proposed block, to be built at an estimated cost of Rs 39 lakhs, will accommodate 30 students on a merit-cum-means basis.

On 14 July, the Ramakrishna Mission, Kadapa, launched VIDYA—Vivekananda Inspiration for the Development of the Youth Awakening—a project for youth living in rural Andhra Pradesh. It has a mobile unit equipped with audio-visual aids and an exhibition kit on Swami Vivekananda. The inaugural function held at village Mantapam-palli had Srimati Prabhavatamma, MLA, Rajanpet, as chief guest.

Flood Relief

Recent floods in Rajasthan, Andhra Pra-



Ramakrishna Mission, Bhopal: Swami Vivekananda Statue at eye clinic; devotees with Swami Gahananandaji Maharaj



desh, Gujarat, Maharashtra, and Orissa have called forth extensive relief efforts from the Ramakrishna Mission.

Severe floods in Barmer and Jaisalmer, Rajasthan, have taken the lives of thousands of people and rendered lakhs homeless. In the last week of August, **Ramakrishna Mission, Jaipur**, began distributing tarpaulins and blankets to 10,000 homeless residents of some of the hardest hit villages in Barmer: Undu, Rajbera, Kanasar, Kashmir, Mokhaba, and Nagarhda. These villages are about 105 km from Barmer city. Primary relief efforts faced major logistic obstacles, as roads and rail lines were impassable, and travel in remote areas was hampered by sand; also, flood waters were standing several metres deep in many places. The cost of this initial relief is estimated at Rs 10 lakh. Further reports are awaited.

Ramakrishna Ashrama, Rajkot, distributed large quantities of foodstuffs and basic necessities, including 27,544 kg rice and dal and 34,430 kg wheat flour, to 48,750 persons of 24 villages in the flood-affected Surat, Kheda and Anand districts. The centre also provided medical relief to 1,107 persons.

Ramakrishna Mission Vivekananda Memorial, Vadodara, distributed 1,200 relief bags (containing 10 kg wheat flour, 5 kg rice, 2 kg dal, 1 kg oil, and other staples), 36,685 food packets, and 26,500 water pouches to 36,685 persons of 15 villages in flood-affected Surat and Vadodara districts.

Ramakrishna Mission Ashrama, Aurangabad, distributed food and other necessities to 11,803 persons in Aurangabad and Nanded districts.

Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna

Mission, Mumbai, served 7,090 persons in Buldana district, and provided medical relief to 200 persons.

Ramakrishna Math, Pune, distributed 75 packets containing biscuits and chanachur, and 95 blankets to 66 families in Pune.

Ramakrishna Math, Puri, provided 8,758 kg chira and 680 kg sugar to 2,589 families of 25 villages in Puri district.

Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission, **Rajahmundry**, served 3,500 plates of cooked food and 5,000 water pouches to 875 families of 18 villages affected by floods in the East Godavari district. The centre also provided medical aid to 711 flood-affected people.



Delivering relief at Gunnepalli, Rajahmundry

Refugee Relief

The recent ethnic disturbances in Trincomalee district, Sri Lanka, displaced hundreds of families to Batticaloa town. **Ramakrishna Mission, Batticaloa**, distributed uncooked food items to 300 families, and milk powder and toiletries to 175 families sheltered in the refugee camps. *